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Paloma negra

by

David Perez Gomez

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Program of Study Committee:
David Zimmerman, Major Professor
Stephen Pett
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PART I

*No pregunten quién soy
porque no se los digo
solo sé que adonde voy
el amor va conmigo.*

*Y a puro valor
he cambiado mi suerte
hoy voy hacia la vida
hoy voy hacia la vida
antes iba a la muerte¹*

¹ *Don't ask who I am/ I won't tell you/ I know only that where I go/ love follows/ and only through courage/ I have changed my luck/ Today I go toward life, toward life/ when before it was death—lyrics from *Hacia la Vida* (traditional Mexican folksong—public domain).*

1. *Hacia la Vida*

Felipe drowned, they said, and it took Alicia a moment to realize that the drowned man they spoke of, *pobre* Felipe that could have been anyone, any face, was actually her husband, her Felipe. They had to hold her up. She could see in the eyes of her neighbors, who had come to tell her the news, how truly horrid she must have seemed, her face undone by pain and hollering. They tried to comfort her but it was useless; their faces were a blur. On their lips she could make out two words—one, *Felipe*, with that pronounced “p” at the end that made everyone appear to be smiling, and the other, that horrid, shapeless word, *ahogó*. Drowned. Nothing her neighbors said had the same weight, the same presence as those two words and for the rest of her life nothing ever did. She lay crying in the arms of her neighbors, kept screaming her husband’s name, so that after a while her voice began to break down into a meaningless cry, into a shrieking, barking, painful call that had at its heart a pleading quality. The neighbors could only look at her and sigh. They could feel her desperation and had to look away at the sky or the mountains, or what turned out to be worse, the blue sea not far away in the distance, with its indifferent sway, its coming and going, like death or life or anything else.

“What happened?” Lupita yelled as she approached the crowd.

She had been cleaning beans in her kitchen table when she heard the screams. She came out to find a crowd outside Alicia’s house, and Alicia on the ground, clawing at the dirt and kicking erratically, like an animal struggling against the massive and absolute force of death. The men were fanning her face with their hats.

“What happened!” said Lupita again.

“Felipe,” said Rafael. “He drowned.”

Lupita covered her mouth with her trembling hands.

Rafael wore sunglasses, but there were tears rolling down his sunburned cheeks.

“They arrested a man,” he said.

Rafael only had one arm, yet was a talented carpenter and friends with Felipe since childhood. He rested his right arm on Lupita’s shoulders, and pulled her close to him.

“They arrested Juancho,” he whispered in her ear.

Lupita pulled away, incredulous.

“People are saying my Juancho had something to do with this?” she said.

Rafael looked to the ground.

“It’s too early to know, but it sure seems strange,” he said.

Lupita came closer to him, took his glasses, and stared deeply in his eyes.

“I thought you were a friend, Rafael.”

Rafael stared back for a moment but then closed his eyes and turned away.

Lupita went to Alicia. She was now quiet. Her arms and legs were limp. Her hands rested by her side, with a fistful of dirt still in her palms. Lupita kneeled next to her. She placed a hand on Alicia’s face and began to pray.

They all began to pray for the drowned man and his widow.

The police arrested Juancho Torres, Felipe’s fishing partner and the man presumed to know exactly what had happened to Felipe. Juancho had returned to shore alone. He drove the small fishing boat onto the beach, as usual, and walking peacefully, as was reported by

some witnesses, he approached some policemen who were resting under the shade of the trees of the plaza and alerted them about Felipe.

Four young officers, dark skinned and similar, like brothers, brought him to the police station at once, where he was kept in a dark and humid interrogation room. Dr. Neria, the town's physician and ultimate source for answers regarding any matter involving science, mathematics, or the arts, was called in to check on Juancho; apparently the officers who arrested him at the plaza were ordered to prepare Juancho for his interrogation. They covered his head with cloth and beat him with sticks on his head, ribs, and legs. This brutality was customary of the Police Captain's emphasis on procedural expedience, as well as his dedication, obstinate as it often was, to the truth.

The door to the interrogation room clicked open and two men walked in: the police Captain and his second in command—a tall Anglo-Saxon everyone in town knew simply as “Alemán.” The foreigner flipped a switch and a dim light bulb flickered on and off, struggling to illuminate the room. The Captain saw Juancho's blood had splattered on the walls and urine pooled at his feet. The stench of it filled the air.

“I swear I told my men to leave the light on for you, Juancho. I hope you aren't scared of the dark. Although, maybe you've been to *very* dark places lately.”

“Pitch black,” said Alemán.

The Captain lit a cigarette, inhaled the smoke, and breathed out loudly.

“It stinks in here,” he finally said.

“Dr. Neria will be here soon Juancho,” said the Captain. “For now it will be just us. My men can be rough. They hate murderers, you see? Who can blame them?”

The Captain reached in his pocket and took out a thin gold chain with a small medal on the table. He let it shine under the dim light, and finally placed it in front of Juancho, whose unwillingness to confess to the murder had cost him a price paid in blows. Juancho had kept his eyes fixed on Alemán, who had rolled up his sleeves and slowly moved around the table until he stood behind him, but at the sight of the necklace, Juancho remained still, looking intently at the medal. The Captain, with the air of an educated man, proceeded to ask questions.

“So what happened to Felipe, *hombre*? What transpired between you two? I know squalid men like you are simple but you can also be vain. So, tell me.”

The Captain puffed his cigarette and the light bulb flickered.

“I’m not sure what happened,” Juancho said.

“But you were there, Juancho. If anybody knows it’s you.”

“I saw nothing,” Juancho said. *Yo no vi nada*.

“How could that be?”

The Captain pulled a chair and sat across from him.

“Do you know what this is?” the Captain said. He slid the gold chain closer to Juancho. “We found it in your boat. Can you tell me whose initials are those on the back of the medal?”

“Felipe’s” said Juancho. Felipe had worn that medal since he was a kid. The medal was from Felipe’s baptism; it was the size of a fingernail and it had Jesus’ face on one side and Felipe’s initials on the back.

“I turned to look at the sunrise,” said Juancho. “It was truly a beautiful thing to see. I never get tired of it. All the colors. I was daydreaming. It’s not my nature but somehow I got

distracted. Got lost in my thoughts.” Juancho’s voice threatened to give way to the sobs he contained within his chest.

“The mind can be a treacherous place,” said Alemán.

“What were you thinking about?” the Captain asked.

Juancho closed his eyes. The Captain and Alemán exchanged glances.

“I was thinking about my wife,” Juancho said finally. “Then when I came out of it, I turn to Felipe but he’s not there. I was alone in the boat.”

“Are you expecting us to believe that?” the Captain said.

“I dove in yet I couldn’t find him. I dove in deeper—I almost drowned myself because of the seaweed—but nothing. He had vanished. I swear to God.”

“You shouldn’t take the Lord’s name in vain,” said the Captain.

“That’s all I know,” Juancho said. His face was stiff. The creases and wrinkles around his eyes stretched and settled and a bloody tear ran down his face and dotted red his already bloody shirt.

“It’s never good when two men go out to sea and only one returns. You can see why we are trying to get the story straight,” said the Captain. He stepped on his cigarette and spit on the floor.

“Tell the truth *pescador*, if not for God’s sake then for Justice. Felipe’s wife needs to know what happened. Why make her wait in this unbearable agony? She has suffered enough. You have caused her much pain,” said the Captain.

“She might not recover,” Alemán said. “I heard they had to carry the woman to her house with her head hanging like a dead pigeon’s.”

Juancho rested his head by his chest.

The Captain grabbed the gold chain and stood.

“Will this be your official testimony?” he said.

Juancho remained quiet.

“Aleman, the doctor will be coming soon. Make sure Juancho is ready to meet him. We wouldn’t want to waste the doctor’s valuable time.”

The Captain quickly disappeared behind the door. Juancho felt a pair of strong hands on him and the lights went out again.

*

Carlita and her mother, Rosaura, were cooking breakfast that morning when they heard the screams of the neighbors coming from the streets. They were yelling, “a fisherman drowned.” Carlita was stirring the beans with an old wooden spoon that was chipped and burned at the tip, and she ran to the window where she saw the women and men going by; some of them were crying and some of them simply followed the others with blank faces and absent eyes.

“Men die here all the time,” said Doña Juana, entering the kitchen with a cigarette already in her thin, purple lips. “It’s the ocean. It’s female, so she steals our men.”

Carlita’s father had left Rosaura for another woman when Carlita was only six years old. They lived in Mexico City and only recently had come to visit Doña Juana at her ranch in the province. It began with one of Doña Juana’s letters—usually she would write once for Rosaura’s birthday and once for Carlita’s but this year a letter arrived in July, far from any reasonable holiday or family celebration. It wasn’t until the end of the letter that Rosaura

understood two things: First, that Doña Juana had written for Rosaura's ex-husband's birthday and second, that Doña Juana was starting to get lost in her mind. At the end of the letter she had written, "Please give my warmest to Elias and tell him that I'm making the *chilaquiles* he loves so much. Kisses for little Carlita. Did she like the dress? Send pictures." The only time Doña Juana had sent a dress for Carlita was for her fourth birthday, when Rosaura and Elias had moved to their new house in Chapultepec. Two weeks after the letter had arrived, Rosaura and Carlita took a bus headed for the Pacific coast and arrived in town one day prior to Felipe's death.

"Those beans are ready," Doña Juana said.

Carlita brought the beans and the tortillas. Rosaura brought the rest: eggs with green beans, sliced bread, Doña Juana's hot salsa, lime water, and an ashtray. The three women lowered their head and Doña Juana said a prayer:

*Señor, bendice estos alimentos
que mi familia ha preparado.
Ayúdanos a vivir en paz y
A disfrutar lo que nos toca.*

Lord, bless this food that
my family has prepared.
Help us to live in peace and
To enjoy what is ours.

Doña Juana and Rosaura began to eat. Then Carlita said:

"Also, help the drowned man, so he can find You in heaven."

Rosaura and Doña Juana stared at each other and then at Carlita. She was holding her hands together and then crossed herself. She was fourteen years old. After a moment, Doña Juana said, “Amen, *mija*. Maybe we should go pay our respects to the widow. We all know how hard it is to lose a man.”

They all looked at one another and ate in silence.

“I hope she didn’t love him,” Rosaura said.

“*Mija!*” said Doña Juana. “What an awful thing to say.”

“No, *Mamá*. It’s actually a very nice thing to wish for her. The dead are dead and that’s that, but the living,” she said and put her fork on the table. “We stay and have to deal with loneliness and pain. It’s a tragedy that her husband died, but it’s better for her if she isn’t, on top of widowed, heartbroken.”

“These are the things you say,” said Doña Juana. She dipped some bread in her beans and ate.

“Of course, since you’re so happy with Elias—” she said.

“Elias left us many years ago, *Mamá!* Can’t you remember?”

Carlita remained quiet; her mother had warned her about Doña Juana and her behavior. Still, Carlita felt a sadness that surprised her. Tears came to her eyes and she looked toward her mother. Rosaura held her hand and squeezed it. Doña Juana drank her lime water and lit another cigarette. She smiled at Carlita.

“Carlita, do you think we should visit the widow?” said Doña Juana. She exhaled smoke through her nose and then coughed. “I think we should try to make up for your mother’s bitterness,” she said between coughs.

After breakfast, the three women went to Felipe's house. From the iron gates of Doña Juana's ranch, they walked uphill toward the humble neighborhoods at the edge of town. The roads there were not paved and when it rained the water flowed like a stream, creating a trough in the middle of the street. The women walked by the edge of the road, following the footprints of those who were already at Felipe's house. There were petals of different colors, strewn about on the cracked mud. The path of petals led all the way to Alicia's door. Carlita looked ahead and sighed.

"We didn't bring any flowers," she said.

When they arrived there were men standing outside, smoking cigarettes and drinking from bottles with missing labels. They were quiet and bowed their heads when the three women came closer.

"Go ahead. They're all inside," one of them said. The man wore sunglasses and was missing his left arm. His empty sleeve flapped in the wind and he pointed to the opened door with his right arm.

They walked through the iron door into the front yard. It was basically a cement slab with a drain in the center. On the floor, near the walls, there were large tin cans, which previously had contained *chiles* and other vegetables, serving now as colorful flowerpots—although only the branches of what had been rose bushes remained. Three clotheslines hung from wall to wall and Felipe's white shirts were still there, drying beneath the sun, held by wooden clothespins. Doña Juana brought one of the shirts close to her face and smelled it.

"She will treasure these. I know."

They came inside the house. It smelled of heavy incense and candles and of flowers, wilting. There was a picture of Felipe on the dinner table, surrounded by gladiolus and

velodoras of the Virgen de Guadalupe. Most of the women were sitting on the floor, surrounding the widow who had collapsed on the tile floor. Someone came from the kitchen with a glass of water and another woman was fanning the widow with the palm of her hand. The women hid their faces behind black veils and prayed in unison.

“*Pobre mujer*,” Doña Juana said. “Grief is taking her. We have to do something.”

“But what?” whispered Rosaura. She was holding her hands behind her back, as if trying to avoid the slightest contact with the sorrow that abounded in the house.

“The least we can do is pray for her,” Doña Juana said.

They came closer to the widow and held hands. Absolute silence overcame them and only the widow’s agitated breathing could be heard. The widow moaned and called for her husband. Carlita felt tears coming to her eyes and something told her she should leave, that this place was only for adults. She began to move away from the group when Doña Juana grabbed her hand and made her kneel next to her.

“*Chamaca*. Pray for her. Pray for all of us,” she said.

Carlita began to pray in silence. She asked God to comfort the miserable widow. She asked Him to bring peace into her heart, to take away her despair. She thought about the petals on the road, how they had twirled playfully around their ankles as they walked. Perhaps that was God, she thought.

Doña Juana pulled Carlita closer to her and whispered in her ear.

“What is your father doing outside with those other men?”

Carlita tried to ignore her. She closed her eyes, held her hands together in the most reverent pose she could put on, and eventually Doña Juana let go of her. Carlita had resisted Doña Juana’s delirium but her thoughts could not stray from the memories they conjured up.

She began to picture her father's face. She tried to fight it but the image would not go away: Elias's face, round and blushed, as it was the day when Rosaura and Carlita came across him, one Sunday at the *Zócalo*. He was walking toward them. He held the *other* woman by the arm and he held the hand of a little boy, perhaps three years old, who clearly shared Elias's unruly blonde hair and thin lips. Elias was laughing at something and incidentally glanced ahead to Carlita and Rosaura. It was clear he had seen them. He couldn't hide his surprise and his fear. He blushed. There had been no time to turn away, even though Carlita felt like running. They got closer and closer to each other, one broken family heading toward another that seemed very much intact. When Carlita and Rosaura were close enough to hear the other woman's voice, high-pitched and colloquial, they braced themselves for the inevitably awkward, and hopefully brief, encounter with the man who had abandoned them for a better life. At the last moment, Elias let go of the boy and covered his own face with one hand. He walked past them quickly, without saying a word. The woman glanced at them and kept going. She was thin, but this only accented the sharpness of her shoulders. Carlita felt a knife go through her stomach but there was no blade. No cut. No blood. Standing side by side, Carlita and her mother held hands. Elias never turned back. He kept walking as if Carlita and her mother were strangers. The little boy ran in front of Elias and chased after the doves in the plaza. The birds took flight in a mass of grey wings, fluttering, circling above Carlita and Rosaura, casting jagged shadows at their feet.

The widow opened her eyes and lay on the floor as if she were dead. Carlita was frightened and ran to the kitchen. "*Niña!*" yelled Doña Juana.

"Let her be," Rosaura said.

In the kitchen there was a window above the sink through which Carlita saw a boy the same age as her, or perhaps a bit older, standing alone in the backyard. She couldn't see his face for he stood in front of a large wire birdcage, of the same size him. Carlita kept staring through the window. The boy opened the door to the birdcage and reached inside, almost ceremoniously. There was a flutter of color inside the cage and then he turned around and looked at the sky. Rosaura came into the kitchen.

‘Who’s that?’ she said, peering through the window.

“I don’t know,” Carlita said.

“Did the drowned man have a son?” Rosaura said.

A bird flew from the boy’s hand.

*

Felipe’s son, Sebastian, was different from most boys his age. He enjoyed watching things happen—when it rained he’d stand outside and watch the water flow from the roof of his house, out through the drainpipes, and down the street. He remembered and collected things which others deemed unimportant—the size and shape of clouds, the height of the trees around his neighborhood, shells and sea glass, trinkets found on the beach, and the words of his father, which were often mysterious and intriguing, just like the very objects Sebastian treasured and stored in a wooden box under his bed. It was something his father had said in the weeks prior to his death that compelled Sebastian to leave his mother in the care of the neighbors and the weeping old ladies from the church and go outside.

Sebastian stood barefoot and alone in front of the large birdcage. His mother's canaries moved about within the cage at uneven intervals, from one perch to the other, aimlessly. He felt the earth beneath his feet. It was damp from the rain the night before. He could hear the sea, the waves crashing on the shore. Sebastian realized something had changed in him. He did not tell anyone—no one had yet asked him how he felt—but something inside him had definitely shifted, or matured, or died, or had just been born. The backyard, the scent of the air, the singing of the birds, these things were not the same. Something had awakened in him. He could feel it.

He approached the birdcage and the canaries chirped gracefully. He could feel their restlessness, their eagerness to escape. He unlatched and opened the door, reached in, and swiftly grabbed one of them. The bird felt warm and weightless, like a handful of fine sand. He opened his hand and the bird stood on his fingers, looking at him in the eye. Sebastian looked at the bird's feathers—bright yellow like a flower in bloom—and its tiny feet like delicate twigs, and after a moment, just before he could wish it would stay, the bird gave a quick chirp, opened its wings, and flew away.

"My father's alive," he whispered and he followed the bird with his eyes as it climbed to the clouds and disappeared into the sky.

*

After rising toward the sun and then falling at great speed, the bird coasted on the warm wind currents, suspended above the hills, and tasted the air of its freedom. Its flight was supported and guided by powerful gusts of wind from the coast, by its unyielding hunger

for seed and water, and by those ancient, inherited memories, which dwelled in the infinitesimal cathedrals of its brain.

The bird descended from the green, rolling hills and flew above the town, above Sebastian's house, with its humble tin roof and red brick walls; above Juancho and Lupita's house, with its neglected vegetable garden and Juancho's rusted dinghy overgrown by tall grass. The bird flew over Doña Juana's ranch and perched at the top of her pomegranate tree, where it picked at one of the fruits. It took flight again, with its belly full of the sweetness of the fruit, and soon was gliding over the town's church. It circled the ancient building and perched on the faces of angels and saints on the façade. Eventually it was chased away by territorial doves and had to land on the head of a statue in the plaza, the features of which had eroded over the years; its identity and relationship to the town was unknown. Perched at the head of the statue, the bird was surrounded by the town's activity. The market was in peak operation. Vendors with tents took over streets and alleyways. People wandered in and out from beneath the bright colored tarps, carrying canvas bags full of fruits, vegetables, spices, beef, and the catch of the day. Policemen walked about, lazily patrolling the plaza while eating *raspadós*, ice shavings with syrup. Young women flirted with their suitors. Children chased after stray dogs. Old men sat under the shade, smoking thin cigars and laughing at anyone who wasn't old, ruined, and decrepit.

As afternoon came, the sun was covered by a band of broken clouds coming from behind the mountain range. It threatened to rain and a gust of wind made the trees sway like drunken giants. As the heavens grayed, the church bells rang over the plaza, signaling with their dull clanging that God needed praising, for a fisherman had died and his soul was still here, among the townspeople, as if suspended in the air.

*

The lights switched on again and this time Alemán and the Captain came in followed by Dr. Neria, a small, heavysset man in his fifties, who quickly went over to Juancho and began examining him. By the dim glow of the failing light bulb, Dr. Neria took in the damage: Juancho's left eye was almost closed and bloodshot. His lower lip was swollen and split down the middle. His nose was not broken but had bleed profusely as evidenced by his shirt.

"I told the guards to leave the lights on but they keep disobeying me. I'll find out who's to blame for this. I'll assure you they'll pay," the Captain said.

"I thought this was just an interrogation." Dr. Neria said. "He's in handcuffs! Has he resisted arrest or otherwise merited this kind of treatment?" Dr. Neria began to unbutton Juancho's shirt.

"Of course he's handcuffed. He's killed a man, Dr. Neria," said the Captain while lighting a cigarette. "Of course, he resisted," he said.

"I can't treat his wounds if he's restrained."

"Well, I believe he was just about to tell us what he did to Felipe Molina."

Dr. Neria reached into his *botiquín*, and took out a pair of scissors. He began to cut off parts of Juancho's shirt and beneath the caked-in blood stains, he found bruises on Juancho's ribs and chest.

"I don't think I can help him until you remove the handcuffs," Dr. Neria said. "You can't treat a man like this. This is not proper procedure!"

“What do you want? Respect? Human Decency?” said the Captain. He approached Dr. Neria and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Listen to me Doctor. You may know about medicine, and people in town may respect you, but you don’t know how to treat criminals like these. For all we know he could kill again. He’s dangerous.” The Captain puffed on his cigarette and stared directly into Dr. Neria’s eyes. There was an aspect of this display of authority by the Captain, which struck Dr. Neria as rehearsed, as practiced in front of a mirror. This insight although quite correct, ultimately didn’t make the Captain less threatening.

“You don’t really know if he’s guilty! You don’t even know what exactly happened. He’s a witness and unless you can prove otherwise he should be released and allowed to be treated by a medic.”

Dr. Neria looked at Juancho. There was blood seeping through his thin cotton pants. His hair was matted with blood and dirt and his left eye seemed to be at the point of bursting.

“Why are you doing this?” Dr. Neria finally said.

“The truth,” The Captain said, “surfaces much quicker when a man thinks it’s his only way out. I know what I’m doing, Dr. Neria. If he doesn’t produce a confession by midnight, then I’ll let him go.”

“By then he’ll be *singing* about what he did,” Alemán said, tightening his belt.

Dr. Neria took out a canteen from his *botiquín* and poured some water on Juancho’s face, washing away some of the blood. He helped Juancho drink and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief he’d retrieved from his pocket. Juancho only spoke to thank him and even smiled, faintly, once, after Neria had finished bandaging his shins.

“I’m taking him with me,” Dr. Neria said.

“I believe you’ve forgotten who is in charge here,” the Captain said.

“I’m taking him with me Captain. And then, after Juacho’s injuries have been properly documented and mended, I’ll report you to the authorities in the *Ayuntamiento*.”

The Captain put out his cigarette and looked at Alemán. The foreigner smiled and with a quick motion of his arm, smashed the light bulb with his baton, plunging all of them into the most intimate darkness. Juanchito screamed and Dr. Neria tried to protect him but he couldn’t see. A pair of strong hands grabbed Dr. Neria by the collar and pushed him against a wall. Aside from Juanchito’s screams, there was complete silence. As he struggled to see in the dark, Dr. Neria felt the cold touch of a gun’s barrel on his face.

*

Carlita, Rosaura and Doña Juana arrived at church that evening, dressed in black to pay respect to the recently deceased fisherman. Most of the pews up front had been taken and they had to sit in the back. The church was unusually full that afternoon; people were hoping to see the widow but she had stayed home to rest.

“I don’t like sitting back here,” said Doña Juana, “I could’ve stayed home we’re so far away.” While they waited, Doña Juana greeted some of her old friends—women whose voices seemed familiar but whose faces remained in the dark.

“*Mirala*,” an old tiny woman, Maruca, said to her elderly companions as she greeted Doña Juana with a smile that showed countless, yellow teeth. “I haven’t seen this woman in here since Easter of last year!”

The women hugged.

“What can I say? I’m resurrected,” said Doña Juana, holding the woman’s hand in hers and smiling too.

“And with style!” said Maruca. “Look at you, all dressed up and perfumed. *La belleza más fina, mujer.*”

“You think?” said Doña Juana, turning her face to display her strong profile.

“We won’t be able to put up with her at home,” joked Rosaura, who had inherited her mother’s face.

“Is this little Rosaura?” Maruca said. “But look at you. You’re a woman now.”

“Don’t let her fool you,” said Doña Juana.

“And this is your daughter?” Maruca said.

“That’s my princess,” Doña Juana said beaming with love.

Carlita had been looking across the aisle at a boy who had come in holding a candle. It was the same boy she’d seen earlier at the widow’s house.

“Carlita,” Doña Juana said and nudged her with her elbow. “Maruca is trying to say hello.”

“Oh, hello. Maruca?” the name made Carlita smile.

The church organ began to play and people hurried to their seats.

“*Andale,*” said Doña Maruca. “I better find a seat. It was nice seeing you again Juanita. You have to leave your house more often. It was nice to meet your girls.” The old lady walked across the long aisle looking for a place to sit. Carlita felt something inside her heart flutter a bit when the boy stood up to let the woman take his seat. Carlita saw him put his hand on Maruca’s shoulder as she lowered herself in the seat.

“It’s that the boy you were talking about?” asked Doña Juana.

“Yes,” said Carlita, blushing a bit.

“It was his father who drowned today.”

“I didn’t know. He seems so calm,” Carlita said.

“Poor Sebastian,” said Doña Juana. “I wonder what he’s going to do now. It will be hard not having a father and with that broken woman for a mother.”

Carlita hadn’t seen Sebastian’s face very well before but now that she saw him again, his face seemed honest and curious. Perhaps it was the candlelight, which made his eyes seem bright and deep, or perhaps that in spite of the tragedy that had befallen him, he still appeared to be standing straight. He had the face of natural catastrophes and the lure, the hypnotizing nature, of dancing flames. He seemed much older to her now, leaning against the wall of the church, staring back at her with those eyes that made her feel frozen, caught under a wave of time, moving slowly.

Sebastian had been looking for a seat when his eyes incidentally came across another pair of eyes who were staring at him quite intently—Carlita’s. The priest began to speak but Sebastian found he couldn’t pay attention. From where he stood he could see Carlita sitting between two women. One he understood to be her mother, from the shape of their faces. The other he deduced was her grandma—since all three women looked alike. Sebastian realized they were essentially the same woman divided in many years.

Sebastian was not calm. On the contrary, he had found Carlita’s eyes equally disarming. As the priest gave a special prayer for his father’s untimely passing, Sebastian dove deeper and deeper in the sea of Carlita’s eyes. There was something inherently good in her eyes. They seemed to be saying something that his heart had never been told before. They

articulated something so pure and absolute that even his father's words seemed to fall short. This girl's eyes appeared out of the blue in a sea of other simpler eyes, of eyes which never really saw him—like his own mother's—and they reached out across the room and held him.

What was her name? Who was she?

*

After the mass for Felipe, Alicia's house was deserted. There were candles and flowers yet the house remained dark somehow. The neighbors had gone home. It was late, and even though Lupita offered to stay, Alicia declined. In the end, Lupita left her sleeping on the bed she had shared with her husband since they got married—the same bed that had belonged to Felipe's great-grandmother and had been passed down through generations. The house was quiet. Alicia would awaken only to weep into Felipe's pillow, which she held in her arms as if it were Felipe; his scent was still there from that morning. Other times she would wake up and just stare at the ceiling and listen to the sounds of the house. Still, it was so quiet it was easy to get lost in time. Soon it was hard for Alicia to tell when she was awake and when she dreamed. She kept hearing her Felipe's voice asking her to wake up, to get out of bed, to open the curtains. The voice would ask her to go outside, to go find Sebastian. And so she would. In her dreams she watered her plants and fed her canaries, and the house was full of flowers but not for the dead, for the living. Flowers for lovers. She heard Felipe's voice again, as if coming from within the walls or from under the floor. It said, "Forget me." *Olvídame*.

Alicia woke up sweating and crying at the touch of a familiar hand on her face.

“Felipe?” she said.

“It will be better soon.”

“Felipe, it’s that you?” Alicia implored.

“It’s me, mother,” Sebastian said and Alicia turned quick to find Sebastian standing by her bed. Sebastian was growing into a young man, and Alicia had begun to see traces of Felipe in the way Sebastian moved. She could also hear him in Sebastian’s voice.

“Your father...I thought he was here. He was talking to me.”

“I’m sorry I woke you,” said Sebastian.

“I think I was having a nightmare,” Alicia said. She wasn’t weeping yet her eyes swelled with tears.

“What are we going to do now?” asked Sebastian. He sat by her side and reached his hand to wipe her tears.

“I need to be alone,” she said and pushed his hand away.

“I was only trying to—”

“I really need to be alone. I’m tired. Go outside and clean up.”

“Mother,” Sebastian whispered.

He was all that was left of Felipe; he was all she had left. Without ever touching, mother and son looked into each other’s eyes and saw immense solitude; the kind only two beings that were once one can suffer. Alicia began to cry and turned away from him. Sebastian remained in the room for a moment, standing at the foot of his mother’s bed.

“Make sure you throw away all those flowers, ” Alicia said.

The Captain was a stern and prejudiced man. He never compromised or abandoned his own procedure; he had no evidence and only one witness—not even Felipe’s body, although fishermen had searched for it everywhere. The investigation into Felipe’s drowning had reached a standstill. When the sun came up the following morning, Juancho was allowed to go home.

Alemán escorted him and Dr. Neria to the street and said, in a voice that carried the sounds of other lands and other peoples, “Juancho, stay in town. If you leave, make sure I don’t ever find you.”

“You almost killed an innocent man, you brute!” said Dr. Neria but the metal door shut in his face.

Outside the police station Juancho saw his wife Lupita waiting for him, with that same look, that same exasperation she always had.

“*Mi vida!*” she said and ran to embrace him.

He ran toward her and held her in his arms and cried and shook and hid his face in her flowing black hair. Juancho couldn’t speak. He just hugged Lupita and cried.

“Let’s go home, *amor*. Let’s go home,” said Lupita, fighting back the tears.

“I did what I could to mend his wounds. I’ll stop by later today to change the bandages, clean the wounds, and check his eye,” Dr. Neria said.

“Thank you, Doctor,” said Lupita. “May God repay you for your kindness.”

The couple held each other and Juancho spoke about the Captain and how Alemán had held him against the wall of the interrogation room, a baton to his neck and everything.

Lupita listened to him and caressed every part that hurt. She wanted to make him feel better, to be the wife that does that for her husband, to be his to lean on like he had been for her. Jauncho got quiet when they neared Felipe's house and Lupita saw there were tears in his eyes. They saw the black cross hanging over the door and what was left of the candles the neighbors had left burning by the door all through the night. They stopped in front of the door and Juancho touched the door.

"She must be devastated," Lupita said and looked at Juancho. "I can't imagine what she must be feeling."

She rested her head on Jauncho's shoulder. Juancho caressed the door.

"God bless her," he said.

After Juancho and Lupita arrived in their home, they got into bed. Lupita helped Juancho out of his clothes and gasped at each bruise and battered part of him. He lay on the bed naked. Then she undressed. In her tired way of undressing there was something old and somber and they knew it. Like two old animals they settled on their small bed and facing the walls, rather than each other, they tried to sleep.

"I keep hearing children's voices in the house," she said. "Sometimes outside, in the garden, or even sometimes when I sleep, I feel them looking at me. Standing at the feet of the bed, waiting, I guess, for me to open my eyes, but I never do."

"Do you know what I just went through?" Juancho asked.

Lupita didn't answer.

"Felipe is dead—my best friend in the world—and his family is going to need our help to find its way again."

"What do you mean?"

“I mean they have no way of surviving. Felipe was everything to them. Now they have nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

“So what are we going to do?”

“We are going to help them. They would help you if I would have died.”

“Are we going to give them money? You know we are short of that and we’re not taking them in here either...we don’t have enough room as it is,” Lupita said.

“There are other ways. I know that the boy has to start bringing in money for Alicia and that Alicia needs someone to look after her. Maybe a neighbor or something. Maybe you.”

“But Juancho, she’s too proud for that.”

“I don’t care. She might lose her mind trying to deal with this. Felipe said that she was—”

“What? Bitter to the bone?”

“No, he said she was delicate...soft-hearted.”

“Fine then. I’ll visit her and see what she says.”

“If you see the boy, tell him to come see me.”

As Juancho closed his eyes, he remembered the incident. How afraid he was when he dove into that cold darkness that enveloped him, except for the dim light, like hope itself, coming in from the surface. He remembered how alone he felt, how insignificant his efforts were—he’d looked everywhere before coming back to shore. He remembered the guilt of leaving Felipe behind. Felipe, his best friend since childhood, the most graceful swimmer, and the liveliest man he’d ever known.

Two days passed. Juancho had tried to recover quickly because he wanted to go look for Felipe. He'd gotten to the door and then collapsed—his leg, it turned out, had a hairline fracture and he'd made it worse by walking on it. By the third day, he felt like he could walk, even though Dr. Neria had recommended a full two weeks of bed rest. Juancho woke up and dressed in the early darkness of dawn. Lupita woke up and searched for him in the sheets.

"You know, you don't have to go back to the boat," she said, speaking to the black silhouette she saw in the middle of the room.

"I'm alright, Lupe. I just need to go back out there."

"But you're hurt."

"Dr. Neria's pills helped with that."

"But now you're alone. Who's going to go with you?"

"Nothing's going to happen to me. Nothing ever does."

"This happened."

He approached the bed and kissed her on the forehead. She held his face in her hands and realized there would be no stopping him. He had to go.

"It's safe out there. That's where I belong."

"But people are confused. Maybe it's safer to stay."

"We need the money, *mujer*. How are we going to eat if I stay and rest?"

Juancho left his house and walked downhill through the streets of the town. When he reached the beach, he found that his boat had been vandalized. Someone had written that he would be going to hell for what he had done. They also wrote *Asesino* with red letters.

“Murderer.” He ran his fingers over the word then looked around him, toward the town. He heard the waves on the beach and felt the wind blowing against his face.

He pushed his small boat, *Resplendor*, as it was called, off the beach and onward through the foamy surf. He kept his eyes focused far in the horizon. The cool water made him smile but quickly enough his face regained its tightness; the clouds seemed to gather above him slowly and the wind changed direction, blowing out toward the open sea. He felt fear for the first time, fear of the water, of its depths and its threatening calm. The only way he managed to keep paddling was to look back at his town, by showing his back to the ocean. Beautiful town, Felipe always had said. He could see the little white houses with their clay roofs creeping up the sides of mountains. There was the plaza and the church, now covered from view by tall trees that swayed very slowly, back and forth with the breeze. He could see his house up on the hill. The light was turned on in the kitchen. He could almost see Lupita, tending to what would be his breakfast upon his return. Beyond his house, the green hills extended into the mountain range. A thin trail of black smoke climbed toward the sky in one of the hills.

He took the boat to the places where Felipe and him used to catch a lot of fish but he couldn't throw the nets in the water. He was afraid. What if Felipe wasn't dead? What if he made a mistake and left him there to die? What if Felipe was still out here? Juancho began to talk to the sea, softly, asking forgiveness. He began to share his secrets with the sea, things he had never told anybody, things the Captain never asked him about and that only Felipe could understand now.

From her kitchen window, Lupita caught a glimpse of Juancho's boat as it sat in the shimmering lights of sunrise, and as she had done for fifteen years already, she lit a candle for *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and prayed for her husband to come home with fish.

2. Primer aliento

Sebastian was born in the middle of the night. Alicia woke up sweating, with a sharp pain in her abdomen and she held Felipe's arm and said, "Something's happening." He got out of bed, lit a candle, and stood at the foot of the bed, looking at her, not knowing exactly what to do. Alicia moaned, arched her back, and kicked away the sheets.

"What do you feel?" he asked her. Alicia turned to him, her eyes glistening, and she held her belly, rubbing it, as if to appease the pain. She moved her legs too, as if possessed by spirits.

"What do you feel? Felipe whispered. "Should I get the doctor?"

"I don't know. It comes and goes. It'd been like this all night. I just thought the baby was restless. Now I don't know."

Her voice failed to hide her panic; Felipe felt it in his chest. There was something about the way her eyes moved, slightly dazed, that concerned him. She searched the room with her eyes. She seemed lost in her own body.

"I'll get the doctor," he said.

He came closer, took her hand and kissed it. She snapped it away as if she had touched fire. It was like she didn't know him.

"It will be fine, love. The doctor will help you," he said.

Felipe ran as fast as he could through the dark streets of his neighborhood. The night was still and quiet. Above him, distant stars shivered while the moon commanded the tide and scarred the land with its gritty light. Felipe moved quickly downhill. At times he cut

through other people's backyards and through desolated, empty patches of land. He came upon a pack of stray dogs, which chased him into town but gave up when he stepped under the pale light of the *faroles*, streetlights. When he finally arrived at Dr. Neria's house, he rang the bell and yelled for him to come out. He pounded with his fists on the windows and said, "*Doctorcito* Neria, please wake up!" The lights in the house lit up after a few moments and Neria stuck his head out the window. His hands gripped the iron bars that framed the window.

"Who is it? What's wrong?" he said.

"It's Alicia, *Doctorcito*. The baby's coming. Please hurry! She's in a lot of pain!"

"I'll grab my things," said Dr. Neria and disappeared behind the thin curtains.

The light above the doorway came on and Felipe noticed his dirty feet kicking softly, anxiously, the frame of the thick wooden door. He hadn't noticed he was barefoot until then. Neria came out, the hair on the back of his head still flat from the pillow, and his eyes were blinking quickly, trying to focus on Felipe's face. He handed Felipe his *botiquin* and said, "Lead the way *muchacho*. Everything's going to be fine."

As they came closer to Felipe's house they could hear Alicia screaming in the distance. "She'll wake up the whole town," Neria said, breathing heavily for they were now running faster and faster up the steep hill leading to the house. When they reached the house and Felipe opened the door for Dr. Neria, the screams stopped as if someone had extinguished a loud fire with a bucket of water. The men paused and Felipe gave Neria a cold, petrified look, fearing the worst, but Neria shook his head.

"Once we go through this door I'll need you to do everything I say," Dr. Neria said.

"Can you do that for me, Felipe?" Dr. Neria's face tightened.

“Absolutely,” said Felipe.

They shook hands.

“I left her in the bedroom,” said Felipe and they went inside.

The bed was empty. Dr. Neria stood by the door while Felipe looked under the bed. “We must find her,” urged Dr. Neria. Felipe looked inside the covers and found a dark bloodstain, round like a plate with three smaller dots drifting toward the edge of the bed. The candle had gone out. A blade of moonlight came in through the window. Each of them grabbed a candle from the dresser and lit it.

“Alicia!” Felipe yelled. “Where are you?”

“Check every room,” Dr. Neria said.

The two moved quickly through the house, like bandits, holding candles and calling Alicia’s name. He placed his baptism medal to his lips and prayed as he searched for Alicia. The small house now seemed too big for Felipe, a maze almost, and he and Dr. Neria seemed lost. Alicia was nowhere to be found. They came outside to the backyard. Dogs barked in the distance. The wind picked up.

“There she is,” said Dr. Neria and ran toward Alicia. She sat with her back resting against the brick wall that separated their home from the empty lots around it. The wall cast a shadow that covered her almost entirely. Only her toes were touched by moonlight, and her eyes shone like a cat’s in the dark. Dr. Neria held a candle in front of her face. “Woman,” Dr. Neria said, “tell me what’s wrong.” Alicia mumbled something Dr. Neria could not understand. He opened her eyes and tried to look inside her pupils.

“Felipe, I need more light!” he screamed.

Felipe dropped his candle on the dirt.

“Doctor,” he said as if speaking to a priest, “something’s wrong.”

“If you don’t help me Felipe I can’t help your wife. Now I said I need more light and we need to move her inside!”

Felipe didn’t answer.

“Felipe—” He finally turned toward Felipe and saw he held something in front of his chest with both hands—something that sparkled with the moonlight, something wet and shiny like an eel. Dr. Neria didn’t recognize it until Felipe brought it closer to the candlelight. “It’s my son,” said Felipe with tears in his eyes. Dr. Neria held the candle near the newborn. It was covered in dirt; it seemed lifeless. The hands were outstretched and its eyes closed.

“We must get inside.”

Both of them turned to Alicia.

“Felipe, you left me,” she whispered. She raised her hand into the moonlight and pointed to Felipe. “In this desert, you leave me,” she said. *En este desierto me dejas.*

“I’m right here, *love*. You’re not alone anymore,” he said to Alicia while looking desperately at Dr. Neria, as if asking him to say something.

Dr. Neria took the baby from Felipe’s arms and motioned for him to help his wife off the ground, which Felipe did immediately.

“We must get inside,” Dr. Neria said firmly. “It’s not clean out here.”

Felipe carried Alicia through the narrow doorway. She kept repeating how he had abandoned her. She kept talking about the desert. Dr. Neria followed them with the baby in his arms.

“Change the sheets on your bed and get your wife to lay down. I need lots of water and lots of lights. You don’t have electricity?” Dr. Neria said.

“It was cut. We got behind.”

“Alright, then get all the candles you can find. I’ll have to fix her here. We can’t move her now. We must stabilize her first.”

“Is she going to be alright?”

“If you do exactly what I say, she’ll be fine come morning.” Felipe’s lips were quivering and for a second he seemed to breakdown but he held it.

“God bless you, *Doctorcito*.”

“Go, Felipe, hurry.”

While Felipe changed the sheets, Alicia sat at the kitchen table, looking on as Neria tended to the baby.

“Why did you go outside? Neria asked.

“I was looking for Felipe. I thought he had left me.”

“How did you cut the chord? What did you use?”

“Hmm?” she said and looked toward the bedroom because Felipe was talking to himself.

“He does that sometimes when he’s nervous,” Alicia said.

“I saw a gutting knife outside. Is that what you used to cut the chord?”

Alicia kept quiet and began rocking herself slightly on the chair. Then she mumbled something and brought her knees to her chin.

“What was that?” Dr. Neria said and he came closer, kneeling in front of Alicia.

“I used my teeth,” she said. She covered her face with her hands. “I can still taste it.”

“Bed’s ready,” said Felipe coming back from the bedroom.

“Take her inside, Felipe.”

Felipe waited outside with his newborn baby while Dr. Neria took care of Alicia. He could hear Alicia moaning in pain sometimes but for most of the time she was quiet. The whole house seemed submerged in utter silence. As he held his son, Felipe began to feel that he was lucky man. He was profoundly lucky. Fortunate to have a wife that could deliver his baby. Thankful that the baby was here, in his arms after waiting for so long. Felipe understood that Alicia was also blessed and so was their newborn son. He was a lucky boy to have found them in this life, to have arrived that night under the stars and the moon, like a prophet. His son was a great miracle; forces bigger than anything Felipe had ever felt touched his life: destiny. Sitting in his kitchen by the candlelight, holding his son against his chest, gave him confidence in the future—something that up until then he'd only had sparingly, when the weather seemed fair for fishing or on those warm summer nights in the middle of a storm when he'd lay on his bed awake, smiling and listening to the raindrops drumming on the thin roof of his house, while Alicia giggled in her sleep, with a laughter only Felipe knew she had.

A son was a blessing and his and Alicia's had finally come.

*

Dr. Neria came outside after an hour and found Felipe asleep on one of the kitchen chairs, with the baby sleeping in his arms. He walked over to him and tapped him on the shoulder.

“I'll come back later to check on her and the baby.”

“I’ll walk you out, Doctor.”

“I’ll find the way, Felipe. You mind the baby. And get some rest too. You’ll be in charge of the housework while your wife recovers. She’ll need to eat something soon. Feed her soups and give her plenty of water. Nothing heavy and nothing spicy either. The baby will need to eat soon too. Alicia will know what to do about that,” Neria said smiling.

“I’m a lucky man, aren’t I *doctorcito*?”

“Of course you are, *muchacho*.”

“I’ll be back soon.”

As he made his way through the house, Dr. Neria saw Alicia’s bloody handprints on the walls of the house. She left them on her way to the backyard and they reminded Dr. Neria of old, ancient cave paintings, like he had seen in books. Dr. Neria traced his hand along the handprints. Sometimes it still bothered him—knowing that he had this power over people. Alicia might have bled to death, the baby might have died, and their lives could have been wrecked if it hadn’t for him. Felipe might not have thought of himself as a lucky man if Dr. Neria had not been there to help him. The impact Dr. Neria had on the people of this town troubled him sometimes and as he walked down the hill to his house, he began to wonder something about Alicia.

In all the time he was with her, from the moment they found her in the backyard until he left her sleeping in her bed with clean sheets, Alicia never asked about her son.

*

Sebastian was at school the morning his father, Felipe died. The news of the tragedy did not reach him until later when he was playing soccer at school, during recess. Dr. Neria came to Sebastian's school and through the gate he saw Sebastian playing, running along with other boys, and he thought about the delicate world this young man lived in and how it was about to change forever.

Neria approached the gate attendant.

"I've come to pick up Sebastian Molina."

"Which one is he?"

"The skinny one," said Dr. Neria smiling since all the boys were of about the same complexion, all of them skinny legged and clumsy—their bodies caught in a growth spurt, stuck in the in-betweens of adolescence.

"Just call his name," Dr. Neria said to the man. The attendant stared at him blankly.

"Sebastian Molina," Dr. Neria repeated.

The attendant turned and walked slowly toward the crowd of boys in the soccer field of the schoolyard. Dr. Neria recognized Sebastian right away. There was something about Sebastian's walk, slightly rhythmic and graceful, almost feminine but with a firm stride. Sebastian: the kid that came to the world from one kind of humidity into another, who lay under the moon like an animal, in the dirt. Dr. Neria thought him lucky to be alive, and now he regretted having to be the person who would introduce this boy to his misfortune. The walk to the gate felt eternal for Dr. Neria who had to turn away from the boy and the attendant and looked instead at his shoes, scuffed and dirty.

"There you go Doctor," said the man and opened the gate for Sebastian.

“Thank you,” said Dr. Neria and gestured for Sebastian to come with him. Sebastian came outside, hesitant and finally asked, “Is there something wrong?”

“I’m Dr. Neria Sebastian. I delivered you when you were born.” Dr. Neria smiled as if the fact he’d just shared was explanation enough of having to take him away from school.

“Alright,” said Sebastian, “but what’s the matter?”

“Your mother sent me to pick you up. Something happened and she needs you at home.”

“Is everything alright?” Sebastian insisted.

“Just come home Sebastian. Your mother asked me to bring you home, ok?” Dr. Neria began to walk. Sebastian followed. The two of them were silent for a while. They walked slowly. Dr Neria figured there was no point in hurrying now, nothing to be gained or lost for being late or early. So the two of them went by the plaza and Neria sat on a bench and took out his pipe. Sebastian looked at him, slightly puzzled. “I thought we were going home.” Dr. Neria lit his pipe and put his hand on the bench, and said, “Come here, son. Have a seat. We’ll get to your house soon enough.”

Sebastian sat there with Dr. Neria. He took a bright red lollipop from his pocket, unwrapped it, and put the paper back in his pocket. Dr. Neria could hear the hard candy hitting against Sebastian’s teeth.

“I left my books at school,” Sebastian said, almost to himself.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m sure they’ll be there tomorrow.” Dr. Neria held his breath and puffed out a thick cloud of smoke.

“I never get to see the town like this,” said Sebastian. “On the weekends, it’s busy and loud. But his is nice.”

“Yes. This is nice. This is how it ought to be.”

“Is my mother alright?”

Dr. Neria looked away from him a moment.

“Sebastian. You might disagree with me soon enough but I really think you are a special person. I knew it when I first saw you that night back when you were born. I knew you were lucky, you see. And luck, sometimes, counts a million against tragedy.”

“I don’t think I’m that lucky.”

Sebastian was looking at the cloud of smoke rising from Dr. Neria’s pipe. The smoke hung above them, became thinner and thinner and was finally carried away by the wind.

“Sebastian?” Dr. Neria said.

“The wind is blowing out to sea,” he said.

“You can tell that?”

“My father taught me.”

3. *Bajo el árbol de granada*

When the mass for Felipe ended, Doña Maruca invited Doña Juana to meet with the rest of the *old gang*—composed mainly of other widows and unmarried martyrs whose faces Doña Juana had not seen in what seemed like years—to play cards and drink homemade rum with coffee. It was evening but the town was still buzzing with activity, especially outside the church. Soiled beggars with wild hair stretched their cracked hands hoping for a generous coin from the churchgoers, while vendors on tree-wheeled carts sold *tamales con atole*, boiled corn kernels with spices and lime juice, breads, and other snacks. The scent from the pots of corn and *tamales*, whirled around the women as they conversed.

“Who knows how long you’ve kept yourself locked up in your house, Mother.”

“Well, I like to write in my diary and tend to the needs of the house.”

“Well,” Rosaura said, “Go with your friends. It will do you good. Carlita and I will tend to the house.”

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt,” Doña Juana said, “to rekindle past friendships.”

Doña Juana and Doña Maruca left together toward the plaza; the two women held each other by the arm as they moved through the crowded street. Rosaura and Carlita bought *tamales* and walked back home.

“You think she’ll be fine with Doña Maruca?” Carlita asked Rosaura as they arrived at the house. They walked beneath the worn black ribbon that hung above the doorway, a reminder of Doña Juana’s husband’s passing.

“She needs to be reminded of other things. My father’s death has really consumed her. Time away from this house will suit her fine.”

They sat at the kitchen table. Rosaura unwrapped a few *tamales* and served the *atole* in two clay cups. Carlita went to grab two forks from one of the drawers and saw a small picture of Don Julian—her grandfather—tossed in with the silverware. How many pictures of Don Julian could there be? There was one above the stove, one by the kitchen window, one in every bedroom, one even in the bathroom, two or three by Doña Juana’s bedside, and now one more with the bent forks and old spoons; plus the portrait, oil on canvas, of Don Julian and Doña Juana by the main entrance. Add the black ribbon above the doorway, the candles she lit every night before going to bed, the morning prayer before breakfast, and the black dresses she wore everyday—with a veil on Don Julian’s birthday; it was troubling.

“What if she starts talking funny with the other women?” said Carlita and handed the picture from the drawer to Rosaura.

Rosaura laughed.

“The group she’s with...I’m sure they all talk funny by now.”

“She’ll fit right in,” Carlita said.

They laughed and continued eating dinner.

“I haven’t had a *tamal* this good in years,” said Rosaura.

“Do you think it’s good for grandma to be so focused on grandpa?”

“It’s not good at all. She remembers only the good days. And that’s what she holds on to. Your grandpa, like you see him here,” Rosaura said while pointing to the photo of Don Julian, “he was a tough, son of a bitch.”

“Ma,” Carlita said, holding a hand to her mouth.

“She forgets—she chooses to remember him as soft and gentle. *El último caballero*. I’ll spare you the details because it’s ancient history and it won’t serve you to know it, but just know that grandma has created a man that never existed, not like she remembers, not completely as she wishes.”

Carlita pushed her fork into the steaming *tamal* and kept her eyes on her mother. She had stiffened. Her voice was tense, like it was the day when they received Doña Juana’s ludicrous letter.

“She’s lost in what never happened. She’s cheating and living in a dream. Don’t cheat yourself like your grandma. Always see men for who they are—don’t let them fool you,” she said with her eyes staring into space.

Ever since Elias left them, Carlita had to maneuver and understand her mother’s dark mood. It came on suddenly and it stayed. At times it was as if Rosaura simply disappeared for a few days, leaving behind another person—an often silent, delicate woman who was prone to bitter talk and slamming doors. Carlita only knew to be quiet and to wait until the bitterness gave way. They ate their *tamales* in silence. After a moment, Rosaura rose from her seat and placed her plate in the sink.

“I’m going to bed,” Rosaura said.

“I’ll wait for grandma,” Carlita said.

“If she’s not here by ten, wake me,” Rosaura said.

Carlita rinsed and washed the two plates and forks. She dried the dishes with a rag and placed them in the cupboard. She stared at her grandfather’s picture. His gesture was stern and brick-like. He wore a hat and thick mustache; his eyes were a void of blackness. How come grandma was so obsessed with him? What words did he say to her? How did it

feel to have him around the house? Whenever her father was home—before he left for the other woman—everything had become so quiet. Of whatever Elias found in the streets of the city, he brought home only the silence from its dark alleys; it permeated the walls of their apartment so that even after Elias would leave for work in the morning, a blanket of whispers still hung over everything.

Carlita put the picture back in the drawer and went outside to get some fresh air. The fact was that even through all of this, her mother's darkened mood and the ruined dinner, even through her wondering questions about her grandfather, Carlita was still thinking about the boy she saw earlier, first at the widow's house and then at church. In a way, she had enjoyed thinking about something else for a moment, only to allow her thoughts to return to him, like a playful wave in the sea always returns to the shore.

She came out to the front steps of the house. The street was quiet, except for the wind rustling the treetops. It was warm. Carlita sat at the bottom step, her legs stretched in front of her. The wind played with her skirt and she closed her eyes. She heard a noise above, in the trees—like someone had shaken the branches to make fruit fall. She looked up but couldn't see where the noise was coming from. She went over to the tree.

"It's me," a voice said from within the tree. Carlita ran toward the door of the house but then stopped.

"Who are you? What are you doing up there?" she said.

"It's me, remember. From church? Don't be scared."

"I'm not scared, but please come down. If my mother finds you up there she'll think you were up to no good." Carlita didn't really know what Sebastian was doing up in the tree, but still she wasn't scared.

“What are you doing up there, anyway?”

“Nothing. I needed to see you.”

“Why?”

“You came to my house. You saw my mother.”

“Well, we didn’t stay too long. I saw you too, in the backyard with the bird.”

He was climbing down slowly, finding his footing before moving to the next branch. As he did this, leaves fell and glided toward the ground, some landed on Carlita’s hair. He finally jumped down and landed right in front of her.

“Were you hiding?” she said.

“I followed you home from mass. I was looking through the window while you had dinner.”

Carlita blushed and was thankful it was evening; he wouldn’t notice it on her face.

“When I realized you were coming out I panicked and climbed on the tree.”

The wind blew around them in swirls, electric. Sebastian smiled and ran a shaky hand through his hair.

“You don’t mind that I followed you?” he asked.

“I was thinking about you,” she said.

They faced each other. Something unraveled before them, some new emotion that made them get close. Just then, a group of young men was coming down the street. The young men laughed and pushed each other, immersed in their own stories and jokes. One of them was referring to a woman’s breasts. His hands were stretched in front of him. They were most likely field workers, headed home after a day’s work and an afternoon’s drinking. One of them kicked a stone in front of him.

“You want to come in for a few minutes?” Carlita said.

“Sure, if your mother doesn’t mind.”

They went inside and heard the boisterous group passing outside the door.

Carlita and Sebastian followed a main hallway, which led them past the kitchen, and dinning room, and into the patio. There were plants in pots everywhere and an empty fountain with three tiers made of stone. Carlita kept walking, following a narrow path leading to the gardens and the horse stalls. The horses snored and snickered in the dark comfort of the stalls. Carlita took Sebastian’s hand and kept walking, until they reached a spot where the grass grew as tall as their knees. Fireflies whirled around them as they walked and stuck to their clothes.

“I’ve never seen so many,” Sebastian asked.

“I wonder what makes them glow like that?” she said.

“I once asked my father the same question,” he said.

Carlita kept quiet and let go of his hand as she tried to capture one of the insects in her hand. Sebastian grabbed one swiftly from the front of his shirt.

“He said he didn’t know, so later he asked Dr. Neria about it.”

Carlita caught a firefly too; she made a cave with her hands and tried to peer inside through an opening between her thumbs. Sebastian did the same.

“According to Dr. Neria, they have chemicals inside them that react with each other to create light. They use it to communicate.”

“That’s very neat,” she said.

“It also works to attract a mate, like a mating signal.”

They stood in front of each other; they allowed the fireflies to crawl out from within their hands. The insects kept glowing and blinking their greenish light. They brought their hands together, reaching for one another, letting the bugs crawl around their hands. Carlita laughed.

“It’s like they’re talking,” Sebastian said.

“What would you say?” she said.

“If I were this bug?”

“Yes. What would you say to make me fall in love?”

Their hands were brushing together. Carlita felt an electric pulse every time Sebastian’s hand touched hers. She wondered if he felt it too. The insects crossed each other’s path on their fingers. Their pulse of light in synchronized.

“I guess I wouldn’t be able to speak—if I were a bug. So, I would just try to shine the brightest. I would try really hard to show you the brightest, the most beautiful light you had ever seen.”

Sebastian eyes shone like stars in the dark. Carlita couldn’t look away. There were so many things going unsaid. Something was being born between the two of them. Even though they had just met, they felt like they knew each other from a long time back. The way Carlita’s hand fit in Sebastian’s was so natural. It was as if they were destined to hold each other. Perhaps they were too young to know what to do or say, but they enjoyed this mystery of the moment. Then Sebastian kissed her hand and Carlita kissed his forehead, like she had seen her mother kiss her father’s. They stood beneath a pomegranate tree, surrounded by fireflies, and a gentle breeze.

“I’m looking for the right words,” he said.

“You don’t have to say anything,” she said.

Sebastian hugged Carlita and kissed her gently on the lips. She was surprised by how soft his lips were. They had no taste but rather an intriguing moisture, which was refreshing, inviting, and erotic; she felt like she was falling or suspended within a void. She tried to close her eyes but somehow still saw the gentle, blinking light all around her. A gust of warm air made the grass sing and Carlita heard the empty thump of a falling pomegranate, landing neatly at their feet.

Doña Juana had returned from Doña Maruca’s and, after looking everywhere for Carlita, came outside to the back of the house and saw her kissing Sebastian. The two young lovers were oblivious of Doña Juana and she didn’t stop them. She saw them under the tree, the same tree Don Julian had kissed her under many times, back when the ranch was a piece of paradise for them, in the beginning. Doña Juana placed her hand on her chest when she saw Carlita holding the boy’s face in her hands. She let them experience their kiss in peace. Then, after it was over, they held each other and looked up at the sky. Doña Juana went inside to the kitchen and turned on the light to make herself known.

“Oh, god, that’s my grandma!” Carlita said.

“I better leave then,” said Sebastian.

Sebastian kissed her again and then started to walk towards the darkness of the fields. He turned to wave goodbye and Carlita saw his eyes again, his face unusually relaxed and smiling; he was beautiful.

“I’ll come by tomorrow, Carla,” he said.

“You Promise?” she said.

“I promise.”

Carlita could see the burning light of Doña Juana’s cigarette approaching in the darkness of the backyard. Carlita hurried toward her, unsure of what she had seen or what she would say. Once her grandma was beside her she said,

“It’s a lovely night out, isn’t it grandma?”

The horses snored loudly and Doña Juana stepped on her cigarette.

“It sure is a lovely night, young lady.”

She put her arm around her and Carlita could smell a faint trace of liquor on her breath. The two of them looked up at the stars and sighed.

“Lovely stars tonight,” said Carlita.

“Do you plan on seeing that young man again?”

Carlita blushed and smiled. Doña Juana pulled gently on Carlita’s cheeks, like she used to do when Carlita was a little girl. The old woman smiled and her eyes filled with tears for a moment.

“Let’s hope he comes back through the door next time. *Chamaca!*”

4. *El año de las tortugas*

At parties, whenever Felipe and Alicia were asked how they had met, when did their love affair began, they always replied, after some hesitation, that it started the year of the turtles. They referred to the time when a higher than usual number of turtles came to the shores of the town to bury their eggs. Felipe and Alicia told the story so many times that they came to believe it too; they had met at the beach, counting turtles under the glare of the moon. Everyone had been there, young and old, oblivious of any obligation or worry while the turtles dug in the sand in silence. Then Felipe saw Alicia, Alicia saw him, and that was that.

Of course, this oversimplified account of their having found each other on the wet sand was poetic, romantic, enchanting, but not true. They told the story so many times that it was as if it actually had happened. Details were added through the years, unintentionally. A flower in Alicia's hair. A few gentlemanly words that Felipe had otherwise never spoken. The certainty of having found the love of their lives. But this is how it was for Felipe and Alicia. Like the manufactured event of their meeting, their lives were a constantly perpetuated lie, an undying spell or dream in which every regret was incessantly molded, chiseled, fatigued into joy. The truth was that they had seen each other countless times before, in the plaza, the market, and at church. Felipe often shied away from her; he would hide his face beneath his hat and turn away. It wasn't until Felipe's love affair with a married woman, Carmen, came to an end, that he decided, much in the way a fisherman decides to throw his nets in a particular spot in the bay—guided perhaps by instinct or relying on his luck—that it was time to ask Alicia to be with him. They accidentally bumped into each

other at the beach, the evening the turtles came to shore, and that's when Felipe asked if she cared to have a drink with him. They went to the cantina for a few hours and came out in each other's arms, drunk, kissing and groping each other as they walked back to Felipe's hut by the beach.

The next morning, Felipe woke up alone and he didn't care to find Alicia for the rest of the week. Then one evening she came back angry and he pleaded with her to forget about everything that had passed and start over. He said her beauty was beyond all reason, that he didn't understand it, and that he was ready to surrender to her.

Alicia stayed.

A few weeks into their courtship, though they never called it that, Felipe and Alicia had spent almost every day together. The old women in town called Alicia a loose woman for fornicating so openly with a young man whose prospects were uncertain—but more importantly for being intimate outside of wedlock. People stared at her in church and soon she stopped going. She was young—almost eighteen—and Felipe was nineteen.

One afternoon they were swimming in the beach, splashing with the turf and trying to make love, when Alicia turned toward the spot where their clothes lay and saw a crow or blackbird of some sort, probing around in their clothes, looking for food.

"I hope it doesn't steal my money," Felipe said laughing.

"My pendant is right there!" Alicia said.

She swam out and ran toward the bird, which had grabbed something in its beak and now struggled to take flight.

"It has my pendant! The damned bird is stealing my pendant!"

Felipe came from the water, laughing and waving his arms, but the bird managed to fly away, flying erratically over the trees and the town, with Alicia's pendant in its beak. Alicia sat on the sand and started crying like a little girl.

"It was my great-grandmother's. It was the most precious thing I owned."

Felipe placed his arms around her.

"It will come back to you. Family heirlooms always find their way back to their rightful owners."

"It's gone," she said. "It's really gone forever."

The following week, Felipe showed up at her house with a basket and a smile and he asked if she could go with him to have an early dinner in the woods and have a picnic. She grabbed a blanket and two candles and together they started to walk to the outskirts of town. They found a peaceful place under the shade of tall trees, with a view of the ocean and Alicia laid out the blanket, set the two candles on the grass, and lit them. Felipe opened the basket and took out several porcelain plates of different sizes and other containers where he'd stored their dinner. He also took out some flowers and gave them to Alicia with an elaborate bow. He kissed her hand and said, "You are beautiful beyond reason." She smiled and didn't know what to say. Felipe went back to unpacking the contents of the basket.

That evening as the sun was setting below the flat line of the horizon, Felipe and Alicia made love under the swaying trees and then after, as they lay naked, under the blanket that had earlier served as their table, Felipe reached inside the basket and brought out a small, yellow wooden box with a black bird painted on it. Above the bird it said, written thinly and elaborately with a paintbrush: *Alicia's Fortune*.

“What is this?” said Alicia.

“Open it.”

Felipe’s eyes seemed warm and bright like twin flames and he rested his head on Alicia’s shoulder. Alicia opened the box and gasped at her new pendant, which was not emerald like the one she had lost but made out of some darker, opaque stone that reminded her of the color of the town’s public buses.

“I know it’s not the same one but I figured sometimes fortune comes disguised.” Alicia held Felipe in her arms and he began to kiss her neck.

“It’s a lovely gift,” she whispered as he continued kissing and getting closer to her. The candles burned out with a gust of wind and Felipe took her once again. She felt his coarse hands on her breasts—hands she merely recognized or understood. “It’s a lovely gift,” she said again as the night rolled above them. Alicia stared at the trees, and the clouds as they passed, while Felipe pushed himself against her. She wondered what had happened to her real pendant, if that bird would ever return.

Alicia missed her period. She actually waited for two months before telling Felipe she was pregnant. When she finally told him, she cried and he embraced her. They stood outside Felipe’s hut by the beach and looked out into the horizon.

“Now what?” she said.

“I guess this is how it feels.”

“You mean when everything around you crumbles?”

“No, when your life actually begins.”

5. *Donaciones y buena voluntad*

Two weeks after the death of Felipe, Juancho went to visit Alicia one evening. He was wearing a palm hat and a white shirt and was using a cane, for his right leg had been hurt during the Captain's insistent interrogations. Juancho knocked on the door and waited. Sebastian opened the door and stood there looking at him, without saying a word. Juancho looked past him to the patio and then fixed his eyes on Sebastian, whose firm grip on the door made his fingers white at the tips.

"I need to speak with your mother, boy. Is she here?"

"She's praying. What do you want?"

Juancho was surprised by Sebastian's stern face. Did the boy believe it too, that he had killed his father?

"You'll find out soon enough. But first I need to have a word with your mother."

"I told you she's praying. She doesn't like to be disturbed."

Sebastian began to close the door but Juancho pushed it open with his cane.

"Go get her now, boy. Stop wasting my time."

Sebastian swiftly moved the cane out of the way and closed the door. Juancho stood there under the dim light of their doorway. He took out a cigarette and lit it. He knocked on the door with the cane once again. Nothing. Someone rode by on a bicycle., otherwise the street was empty. He was about to knock on the door with more firmness when it opened slowly and he saw Alicia's face come from behind the white door.

"Juancho. What are you doing here?" Alicia said. Her eyes were red from crying, Juancho assumed, and she wore one of Felipe's sweaters wrapped around her shoulders even

though the weather was fine. Her hair was tied with a black ribbon; the knot was loose and the wind struggled to move through her hair.

“Good evening, Alicia, I hope I’m not interrupting anything. The boy said—”

“No. no. It’s alright Juancho. I was just...”

“Sebastian said you were praying. I’m sorry to disrupt you.”

“Oh my God, no. I was trying to get some sleep. But go ahead... or would you like to come in?”

“If you don’t mind. Only five minutes and then I’ll let you go back to bed.”

Juancho came in. He could see Sebastian spying on them through the kitchen window. Juancho removed his hat and motioned to Alicia, trying to get her attention so she’d notice Sebastian at the window. She was busy fixing her hair. Juancho hadn’t been in the house for months and now that he was back in it, it seemed as if only yesterday he had walked Felipe home from the *cantina*. Felipe loved to drink and talk nonsense. Lately it had been about birds and all sorts of other things that Juancho didn’t understand. As Juancho looked around, he noticed that the house seemed like it was caving in on itself, being crushed under its own weight.

“Excuse the mess, Juancho,” said Alicia as she carried away dishes from the dinner table to the kitchen. “I’ve had many visitors lately. I never imagined people were this nice.”

She pointed to one of two chairs and Juancho put a hand on it and waited for her to sit down first. They sat at the table and Juancho put his hand on his knees and waited for Alicia to say something, to ask him.

“Doña Juana,” said Alicia after a moment, “has kept me company. Do you know her?”

“The old widow?” Juancho said and immediately regretted using the term.

“Her husband died twelve, coming on thirteen years ago, and since then she’s kept a black cross over her bed and worn black. Can you imagine?”

When Alicia spoke she looked elsewhere; her eyes wandered off towards the window, the ceiling, her hands, but they never looked at Juancho.

“I can’t imagine,” he said.

“She’s kept diaries—starting from the morning of the funeral. She’s written about everything, every thought she’s had since—every sleepless night without him. So far she’s filled the pages of twenty nine leather-bound notebooks.”

“Poor woman,” he said. He reached a hand to hers but she quickly stood and went to the kitchen.

“I should make some tea.”

They heard Sebastian’s footsteps but he didn’t come see them. They waited for him to appear at the kitchen but instead they heard the front door slam shut, and then dogs barking and Sebastian’s voice, which sounded a lot like Felipe’s, cursing at the dogs.

“That boy doesn’t help me around here. He’s always gone and I never know where he goes.” Alicia’s eyes followed Sebastian through the kitchen window. He walked quickly down the street, kicking stones he found at his feet. “At times I question where he came from.”

Juancho felt something tighten in his throat—perhaps it was grief or the words he wished he was smart enough to say to Alicia.

“Boys that age are restless. They’re like volcanoes waiting to erupt,” he finally said and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief he’d retrieved from his pocket.

“Doña Juana has read me pages from her diaries.”

“That must be terrible. Are you sure that’s helpful?”

After putting some water to boil, Alicia sat again at the table.

“At first, just looking at the notebooks made me cry. She’d cry with me too but then she’d open the notebook, place a finger on the first page and begin to read.”

“I can’t begin to imagine how—”

“It’s not all bad. Sometimes we even laugh,” Alicia said smiling and holding one hand to her chest. “And then other times, she’d be reading to me, about something, anything, and it’s like the old woman suddenly can remember, all of a sudden. Her voice changes and the tears come and she cries and cries with such joy and grief together, until the notebook falls from her trembling hands.”

“Why does she do that?”

“I think she gets lost in time and reading to me helps her remember.”

“Why you? Why not her family or other people?”

“We talk a lot. I can tell her things and she understands me. We’ve both lost our husbands and we help each other remember. We keep each other focused on what’s important: to honor the memory.” She looked at Juancho for the first time. She was beautiful. Felipe’s words came to mind. At one point he had described her as a woman made of stone. Juancho had understood that to mean that she was cold like a stone, but he wondered now if Felipe had meant that she was like a statue. Her face and her eyes certainly

had the seriousness and solitude of someone looking out into the world, hypnotized, unaware of the passage of time—suspended in mid-life.

Juancho looked away from her eyes and stared at his hat, which lay face down on the table.

“Lupita wants to come see you but she’s timid and doesn’t want to impose. She sits at home worrying about you and Sebastian. Well, we both do.” He finally tried to say what he’d come here to say.

“Lupita can visit any time she wants,” Alicia said.

“Well, this is why I’m here, Alicia. I want to say something. I’m sure you’ve heard things.”

There was no going back. He had to say it. For the last two weeks he had thought about this moment, tried to figure out the best way to put it, so he didn’t seem insensitive. The words began to come to him until he finally felt them whirling around in his mouth, waiting for his lips to part. But before he could say what he’d come to say, Alicia reached across the table and held his hands.

“You don’t have to do this,” Alicia said.

“Yes, I do. I’ve thought about coming here everyday since that day, but I thought you’d hate me.”

“I have no reason to hate you,” she said and caressed his hands with her fingers.

“It’s just that—that day was like any other.”

“Shush. I know you’ve had a hard time,” she said.

“I need you to know that I did everything I could. It was just like any other day.” He began to cry. At first just tears rolled down his face but eventually his voice filled with grief.

“I did everything I could,” he said.

He dropped to his knees and kept repeating those same words. He held Alicia’s hands in his and closed his eyes, burying his face in Felipe’s sweater, which rested over her knees. His cane hit the floor.

Alicia lifted his face from her hands.

“I know you were friends,” Alicia said. “You were more than friends. You were like brothers. He’d tell me all the time how much he admired you, that he wished to have your strength. He trusted you with his life. He said that about you all the time.”

“Then I failed him,” said Juancho.

“Whatever happened—wherever he is right now—I’m sure he doesn’t want to see you so tormented.”

Juancho got up from his knees and sat again on the chair.

“Have some tea. It will make you feel a lot better. This was Felipe’s favorite.”

Juancho sipped the tea and thought about Felipe. Life had placed him in this moment against his will, like a fish caught in the nets. The last few days, after Felipe’s disappearance, had been the hardest for him. He had nightmares where Felipe yelled for him. He also dreamed about the Captain, beating him with sticks and leaving him in the dark. But this conversation with Alicia was changing things, alleviating the pain he had carried in his heart all this time. Once he had regained his composure, wiping the tears from his eyes and feeling the knot in his throat unwind slowly, Juancho remembered the other reason of his visit: Sebastian.

“Well, aside from what I’ve just said, I’ve also come to talk to you about more practical matters. First things first.” He reached into his pocket and took out an envelope with Alicia’s name written on it.

“What’s that?” she said.

“Just a little help from the families in the neighborhood. And from my wife and me.” He put the envelope on the table and Alicia stood and went back to the kitchen where she remained silent.

“It’s not charity, Alicia. It’s just the best way that your friends and neighbors can help you right now.”

“I don’t need it, Juancho. We have enough to last us while I find my footing.”

“It’s not about that Alicia. You had expenses that were...unforeseen. This is not the time for pride. You need to lean on those who can help you through this.” Juancho sipped from the tea and put his hat on his knee. He reached into his shirt pocket for a cigarette. Alicia was still in the kitchen being very quiet.

“Would you like some more tea?” she said after a moment.

“That’d be nice,” Juancho said as he puffed on his cigarette.

Alicia returned to the table, took his teacup and went back to the kitchen. She set the steaming cup in front of Juancho and cut a slice of banana bread a neighbor had dropped off earlier. She sat down at the table and asked Juancho for a cigarette. He gave her one and she put it in her lips and then stared at the envelope that was still lying at the center of the table.

“Did someone go around asking for this money?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did someone go door to door, asking on my behalf?”

“No. People keep coming to my house and handing it to Lupita. I guess they expect us to pass it pass it on to you because of me and Felipe.”

“Would you rather they came directly to me?”

“No. It’s just that I’ve never been in a situation like this. I don’t know the rules.”

Juancho sipped his tea. He took a bite of the banana bread and then another puff on this cigarette. Alicia held her cigarette in her lips and didn’t seem interested in lighting it. She just held it in her lips and stared away in some distant direction.

“So, you’ll take the money?” he finally asked her.

“Only because I know Sebastian needs it. Probably more than me. Right now I have no need for anything, you know. It’s like I’m living but I’m not using up any space or any effort. I’m just here, sitting across the table but up here,” and she tapped the side of her head, “I’m already gone.”

“That’s not true, Alicia. And if it is then you need to come back. Your son needs you right now. He’s probably afraid. I’d be afraid if I was suddenly the man of the house.” Alicia looked up from her teacup. Her hair was almost going inside the cup.

“I think Sebastian needs to be occupied with more than just chores. School is out in a couple of days and I think it would be good for him, and for you, if he came with me, to work with me on the boat.”

“What?”

“I would divide the earnings just like there were before, with Felipe.”

“That’s crazy. He’s just a boy. How much help can he be and why pay him so much. Half the earnings?”

“It’s fair. I need a new pair of hands and your family needs an income. At least until you find your footing.”

“What if he refuses? Lately he does what he pleases. I barely have any control over him.”

“Well, he’s young. Both of you need to move forward, even if it’s slow at first.”

Alicia reached and held Juancho’s hand. She took his cigarette and used it to light her own. Then she gave it back and exhaled, blowing up smoke towards the ceiling.

“He won’t do it, Juancho. He’s met this girl and all he does now is go over to her house everyday after school. He hardly ever says hello to me when he comes back for dinner. We sit here and we say nothing to each other. I can see my Felipe in his eyes but the rest of him is someone else.”

“Oh, Alicia, don’t say that. I see Felipe in him too. That’s why I’m sure that when he gets to do his father’s work he’ll understand that he’s a young man now and that even though his life has changed, that death took away something of his, he still has a responsibility to his father and what his father most treasured...You, Alicia.” She smiled and Juancho felt her grief coming back.

“I didn’t know you were so eloquent,” she said.

“Well...”

“No, you are. Your wife must really enjoy talking to you.”

Juancho stared at the last bit of tea in his cup before drinking it in one last gulp.

“It is good talking to someone who is not saying ‘I’m sorry for your loss’ every five seconds. When Doña Juana leaves here, I always feel like the ghost of Felipe is sitting right next to me. I talk sometimes to it. Then I feel like I’m going crazy.”

“Perhaps the old woman should stay at her house if what she wants is to mourn forever. You’re still young Alicia. Doña Juana has lived her life already.”

“It just feels good to talk to someone who understands the pain.”

“Felipe was like my brother. I understand the pain.”

Their eyes met. Juancho wiped a single tear from his right eye. In the days after his encounter with the Captain, his tears ran red with blood.

Juancho stood up and gave Alicia a hug. Then he gathered his hat and cane and Alicia walked him to the door.

“I’ll tell Sebastian about your idea,” she said.

“We’ll all get back to normal,” he said, “especially that boy of yours. He just needs a little help finding the right path.”

“I’m glad you came,” said Alicia.

She saw him walk down the street. She was surprised that he’d offer half the earnings. She felt her anxiety subdue a little, at least enough so that she could think of Felipe without feeling like breaking. The wind blew down from the mountains. She put her hands in the pocket of her sweater and pulled out the envelope Juancho had given to her earlier. She opened it right there under the light of the doorway. There were many bills—some old and some crisp—but there was also something slightly heavier than money. She tipped the envelope on its side and gold chain landed on her palm. It was Felipe’s baptism medal, which he had worn ever since he was little boy. Somehow Juancho had gotten a hold of this, although she didn’t know how he could have. Regardless of how it had come to rest between the donations of her friends, Alicia thought the appearance of this particular item was a kind

of miracle. She held the medal in her fingers and studied it. She saw Jesus' face on one side and Felipe's name on the other. She held it tightly in her hands and leaned against the door that Felipe had painted with his own hands. She looked for Juancho but he had turned the corner and was gone from her view. The wind blew again, colder than before. Dry. She fingered the medal and she cried and sobbed and then, in a moment, she stopped.

She kissed the medal and put it around her neck. She closed the door behind her and went inside to light a candle and to say a prayer of gratitude, given that a part of her husband had found its way back home.

6. *Las piedras*

The Captain never had nightmares. He never had dreams. He used to dream about wild animals or long rivers raging joyfully through deep, green land, making their way to the sea. But since he became an officer and now late in his career, something had killed his imagination. Even in dreams the world offered nothing to him. Well, once he did dream that a crazy indian had come in through the window to kill him, but the dream vanished into the depth of his awakening as soon as he opened his eyes to the darkness of his bedroom. It was different back then. He had just married Carmen and they had recently moved into a new house with large windows and tall ceilings. A home built for important people, for vanished *conquistadores*. Carmen was a voluptuous woman who had always been round and curvy like a pear. The first time the Captain placed his hands around her waist, during a New Year's dance put on by the late Captain Granados, Carmen smiled and said, "Captain Lopez, your hands are so cold! I can feel them through my dress. You're not dead are you?"

They had been married for thirteen years now and the Captain and Carmen barely talked anymore. They had silent breakfasts and even quieter dinners. They only enjoyed going to Sunday mass. The Captain usually conversed with his men and sometimes with the priest while Carmen and her few girlfriends exchanged gossip.

"Lately it has been horrible for me," Carmen said once within earshot of the Captain and his men. "He wanders from room to room, doing nothing. It drives me crazy."

The Captain pulled on his sleeves and fixed his hat; his men had turned their gaze towards him and found nothing, no anger or pain on his face, only a thin, razor blade of a smile beneath his well-groomed mustache.

For starters Carmen was right. The Captain had come from bad to worse. Weekends with Carmen seemed to last forever, but now more than ever after Felipe's disappearance. He was certain of Juancho's guilt beyond any doubt. He spent entire days contemplating different scenarios, trying to figure out exactly why would Juancho want his best friend dead. At first he thought they had simply gotten drunk. Fishermen sometimes drink strong liquor to stay warm in the mornings. A few sips lead to more sips and so on until one of them falls in and drowns. This happens. But when Juancho refused to speak about the incident—his silence pointed to something different, some other event which needed more careful consideration, a detailed-oriented mind like the Captain's, to figure out the answers. He reluctantly let Juancho walk because he had no concrete evidence to accuse him. Nothing but an empty boat and Felipe's baptism medal, which had mysteriously disappeared. It had been close to a month since Juancho came to shore alone. Everyone in town was beginning to forget about the incident. It wasn't as talked about as it was in the beginning. Juancho was fishing again, with the help of Felipe's son. Dust was gathering on the whole story. No one cared. He felt more than ever a desire to continue the investigation. He and Carmen disagreed always, but never more passionately on this issue. Carmen believed Felipe to be a good man who simply suffered an unfortunate end.

"Perhaps it was accidental or perhaps divine," she said once to the Captain over dinner.

"Divine?" the Captain said.

"If Juancho knows anything maybe he is simply too scared to tell. Who knows what happens between men at sea? If it contains anything within its depths, it is secrets," she said.

But the Captain opposed this idea. He felt there were truths too horrible and unjust to surrender to the sea and that it was his responsibility as a public servant and source of law and order in his community, to deliver answers and justice.

“How could people lead normal lives when a man dies and nothing is done about it? What does that say about us?” he said.

That night Carmen left the table early and stood outside in her patio. The Captain ate alone. He spooned food in his mouth while mumbling, “I’ll get you. You will see.”

*

The disappearance of Felipe was causing more trouble than it was worth, the captain told Alemán at the police station. The Captain was looking at the plaza through the window of his office. He smoked a cigarette and exhaled large clouds of smoke that lingered and were filled with light.

“Let’s talk to Juancho again,” Alemán said. “Maybe if I scare him a little...”

“You had your chance,” the Captain said. “You were supposed to get a confession and you failed. Now I don’t have a suspect. I looked incompetent...and you certainly didn’t get promoted. So we’ve done a great job so far.”

“Let me talk to Juancho. I’ll get it out of him.”

“No,” the Captain said. “Maybe it’s time we talked to the people.”

“What people?”

“The people,” the Captain said and pointed with the burning tip of his cigarette at the midday crowd gathering in the plaza.

“People are like stones,” Alemán said.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“They’re full of myths.”

The men stared at each other. The Captain puffed his cigarette and closed his eyes. Alemán rose from his chair and stood beside him by the window. The two of them contemplated the peaceful movements of the world outside the window.

“You know,” the Captain said, “Sometimes I don’t really know what the hell you’re saying to me.”

Alemán laughed and patted him on the shoulder. Finally, he said, “You’re right. Let’s talk to the people.”

They drove the Captain’s truck to the beach. Many of the fishermen had already come back from their early morning activities and lingered on the sand, maintaining or fixing their gear or taking a nap with their hats resting on their face. The Captain, in his haste to obtain a confession from Juancho, never truly investigated deeply the life of the victim. He knew what most people knew about him. Felipe was a fisherman, like any other, hardworking, although perhaps slightly playful and spirited, and nothing more. Perhaps there was a piece missing in the puzzle. Maybe someone out there knew more about Felipe. Maybe that is where the truth was hiding, the Captain thought as Alemán drove them closer and closer to the shore.

They parked the truck and Alemán smiled and pointed towards the fishermen. They were quickly dispersing, gathering their belongings and moving towards their boats. There were only a few who weren’t afraid of them and simply rolled over on the sand, turning their

backs towards the Captain. Most had seen or heard about Juancho's injuries after his encounter with the Captain, and his presence in the beach was frightening as it was surprising.

"I told you these people are useless," Alemán said.

"We can't be certain until we get some answers," the Captain said and he got out of the truck and started walking toward the fishermen.

Alemán stayed in the truck for a minute and finally decided to come along. By the time he caught up with the Captain he was already talking to someone, an old fisherman, whose gray hair contrasted sharply against the darkness of his skin. The old man sat inside his boat, with fishing nets around his ankles.

"Felipe was a humble man," the old fisherman asserted.

"Did he have any enemies around here?" the Captain asked.

"Enemies? Felipe? No! He wouldn't hurt a fly—the man was an angel."

"An angel?" Alemán said. "What makes you say that?"

"You have to promise not to tell on me," the man said.

"We can't do that, old man," Alemán said. "You better tell us now or we'll take you in and have a more formal conversation."

The old man's face tightened. He raised a hand to cover his eyes from the sun and turned to the Captain.

"Why is he always so mean?" he asked the Captain.

"He's trying to get a promotion," the Captain answered, looking at Alemán whose face remained stern and vigilant.

“You can tell me. I won’t tell anyone unless it’s absolutely necessary to convict or prosecute our suspect.”

The old man looked about him and smiled. He leaned closer to the Captain and whispered, “He sometimes would give me a few strings of fish if I came up short. You know, so I wouldn’t get a bad reputation.” The old man scratched under his jaw. “Only if he could afford it, you know. Not always.”

The Captain and Alemán tried talking to other fishermen and they all said the same thing: Felipe was a humble and decent man. He helped them out if possible, sometimes against the wishes of Juancho, who often reprimanded Felipe for being so generous and naïve. It seemed that Felipe’s reputation was intact and would remain so beyond his death. As the Captain and Alemán drove back into town, the Captain was relieved to find that Felipe was a good man. The words of the fishermen fed his desire to figure out the truth. From what he had heard so far, the town had lost someone important, a good citizen, and a man of principles.

The fishermen did mention that Felipe sometimes drank “a glass or two of mezcal” at the local cantina, and the captain, thirsty perhaps for a drink for himself as well as for more confirmation on Felipe’s character, which he was starting to equate with his own, decided to visit the cantina. Perhaps there would be yet more to learn about Felipe. He was turning out to be everything the Captain had imagined a victim of a crime is supposed to be—an innocent person.

The swinging doors of the cantina opened and people had to blink twice when they saw the Captain walk in, a cigarette in his lips and Alemán following closely behind. Men

shuffled to their seats and sat straight—held their glasses with their entire fists and lowered their voices.

“Bunch of cowards,” Alemán said under his breath.

“How can we be of service to you?” the bartender asked. His voice barely hid a quiver of nervousness.

“I’m here to ask questions from anyone who can tell me anything about Felipe Molina. We’re purely gathering information,” the Captain said. “No one is a suspect. Feel free to talk to me if you have any information about Felipe Molina.”

The room was quiet and after a minute three old men raised their hands and said, almost in unison, “We were friends of Felipe.”

The captain approached the men. They sat together at one table, playing cards spread face down and cigarettes burning on a clay ashtray. Alemán came close to them and they looked down at their cards, in fear.

“What, he was a humble man? A great friend? An angel?” Alemán said. “Of course, everyone always says great things about the dead. How brave they were. Or how generous. Where are these people when the man is alive?”

The three men continued to look at their hands while Alemán paced around their table.

“So, tell me. Tell me how wonderful this Felipe was. Tell me everything you never said when the fucker was alive!”

The Captain walked over to Alemán and put his hand on his shoulder. Alemán exhaled loudly. Just then, one of the men said, “Felipe liked his women.”

The captain let go of Alemán’s shoulder and turned to the man who had said this.

“He liked his women?” the Captain asked.

“Yes. Well, maybe it was only one. Maybe just the one. A while ago.”

“He was having an affair?” Alemán asked.

“It’s a great accusation you’re making,” the Captain said to the man. “Are you sure?”

The man put down his cards and picked up his cigarette. He turned to the Captain.

“He came in here once and got drunk. After a few hours of his philosophies and crazy ideas, he looks at me and tells me, ‘I’ve slept with a woman.’”

“You mean outside his marriage?” the Captain said.

“I guess. I don’t know. It was a while ago.”

“Who was the woman? Did he say?” the captain insisted.

“I was very drunk myself,” the man said, “but it felt like a confession.”

The Captain took a few steps around the bar, as if contemplating. This certainly made things interesting. It felt like maybe he had found perhaps another piece of the puzzle, an unexpected one.

“How long before his disappearance did this conversation take place?” he asked the man.

“It must have been a couple of months before.”

“Which doesn’t really mean the event happened recently. This could have been something that happened a long time ago,” the captain asserted as if thinking out loud. He walked again around the cantina. All eyes were on him.

“Did he say anything else?” the captain asked.

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“He said—and you’ll have to excuse me here for being blunt Captain—but this is exactly what he said: that treacherous woman gave me the fucking of my life.”

All the men laughed and the police Captain let them.

Back in the police Station, Alemán was cleaning his rifle while the Captain sat at his desk, thinking about the few contrasting details they had learned about Felipe. The Captain’s original version of Felipe was changing. He almost regretted having learned these new details. It was easier for him to imagine Felipe as a simple victim of a senseless crime rather than a complicated and perhaps even reprehensible character who chased after women and drank too much, yet was generous and humble with his fellow fishermen.

“I don’t know what to make of this,” the Captain said to Alemán.

“It doesn’t surprise me,” he said.

“How could it not surprise you? All this time I’ve thought the man was a saint.”

“All you had was his baptism medal.”

“And today I found out he fucked a treacherous woman.”

“Every man has at least one secret,” Alemán said, as he aimed his rifle at the bare light bulb hanging above them.

“I’m beat,” the Captain said. “I’m going home.” He took the rifle from Alemán’s hands, and switched off the light, leaving Alemán sitting alone in the dark.

“Why don’t you go terrorize someone else? The Captain yelled as he walked away.

“I have a few ideas,” Alemán yelled back.

As the Captain walked home, he thought about Felipe. How could one man be both a simple, humble man and potentially a womanizer and perhaps even a drunk? What if he had

made an enemy because of this behavior? What if Juancho was clean? Who was the treacherous woman who gave Felipe the best night of his life?

All these questions were crowding the Captain's mind as he turned the corner onto the street where he lived. As he neared his home, he began to dread something that had become quite familiar to him, the usual reception he'd get at home: A dark house. Shades drawn. Carmen locked inside her bedroom listening to the radio while his dinner cooled on the table. It had been close to two years since the Captain had made love to Carmen. The sudden urge to feel close to Carmen, paired with his knowledge that she simply despised him, almost crushed him as he slowly, tentatively, with the fear of a teenager, inserted his rusty key within the grinding keyhole of his large, wooden door, and went inside.

7. *La felicidad de Lupita*

Lupita wanted children since the beginning, since the days when making love seemed as natural an activity as watching rain fall. Many nights Lupita and Juancho lay in bed, naked and exhausted, their bodies moist and heavy, like two lumps of warm dough. In those afternoons of surrender how simple life seemed. This is how one lives, she used to think. Lupita would get up to fetch Juancho some water. He'd stare at her body; in his eyes she could see his troubles disappearing, the swaying of the sea coming to a stop.

"God picked this man to be your companion," the priest who married them said at their wedding. And there was never a time, in the beginning, when she had doubted God's good intentions. There was nothing she enjoyed more than those nights or afternoons or even mornings when Juancho and her were together. Losing herself in his arms felt like a responsible thing to do; it was what she was supposed to do to be a good, proper wife, and to be blessed with children.

Felipe and Juancho's neighbor's oldest son, Rafael, who was a strong young man who knew his stuff when it came to construction even though he only had one hand, were adding rooms to Lupita and Juancho's house. While the men worked on the house in the afternoons, Lupita worked on her chores. She'd wash clothes and hang them to dry; she'd clean the house—sweep the floors, clean windows—and sometimes she'd come outside to her front door and watch the neighborhood kids playing hide-and-seek. Other women could tell from the way she watched children that she was eager to have some of her own. Even Felipe and Rafael began to notice the yearning in Lupita's eyes. Once she overheard them talking outside as she prepared dinner.

“Something tells me you’re going to be a father soon,” said Felipe.

“What?” said Juancho as he shoveled dirt into a wheelbarrow. They were merely laying down the foundation upon which the new two rooms would be added. Lupita peered out the window to get a look of them. They didn’t notice her and kept talking.

“Yeah, I saw it too,” said Rafael, “you wife wants kids and soon.” Rafael smiled under his dark sunglasses and snapped his fingers to emphasize his point.

Juancho took a deep breath and motioned for Rafael to pass him a bottle of water they were keeping under a bundled shirt. He took a swig of the warm water, wiped his mouth and said, “First the house. Then the children. Right fellas?”

“You can sing that tune now compa, but Lupita has her own plans about it.” Felipe said. “She probably has names picked out and everything—for five kids!”

Felipe and Rafael laughed as Juancho shook his head vigorously.

“Maybe not five but I think she really wants to be a mother.” Felipe said.

“Once the house is ready,” Juancho said.

“You really think you have a say in this? All she has to do is take you to bed every night and soon enough—*poom*—Juanchito!”

Rafael laughed so hard he almost fell over. He was clapping, using his good hand and smacking his thigh as he swayed back and forth with laughter. And so their conversation went on for the rest of the evening and when it got dark out and Rafael took off his sunglasses, they figured it was time to finish off.

Lupita found it humorous as first, but this quickly died when she realized Juancho wanted to wait for so long. The house could never be done. Most people never finish their house; it’s always an ongoing project.

After washing up under a hose, as was part of their routine, the men came inside the house where Lupita was waiting for them with dinner.

“Hmmm.” Rafael said enthusiastically, “I’ve been looking forward to this all day, Lupita. Your *guisados* are always so good after a long afternoon’s work.”

Lupita wasn’t very good when it came to receiving compliments so she bowed her head a little and said, “just tell me if it’s too salty or if it needs salt.”

“It’s always perfect,” said Felipe who had already sat down and was holding his fork like a harpoon.

“She sometimes puts too much salt. So I tell her every time she does it so she can learn. I don’t do it to be mean. I just do it to help,” Juancho said as he embraced Lupita who was warming more tortillas by the stove.

“You are such a pig,” Felipe said laughing. “You’re lucky that she hasn’t put anything in your food to teach you a lesson. Maybe then you’ll learn to shut up.”

Lupita pointed her wooden spoon at Felipe, in a gesture of agreement.

“Well, I love your food too, Lupita,” said Rafael, “at my house all I get is dry fish and rice. Here you have fish but you also have beef and chicken and you have just the right spices.”

“Maybe, you should start cooking something for her, you know,” said Lupita smiling as she brought Rafael a plate of chicken with mole sauce and rice. “If she only knew what you like then maybe she’ll make it more often.”

Rafael smiled humbly as she came around the table and placed his plate in front of him. Juancho held her hand and kissed it and Lupita sat down with the men as they ate her food.

She had already eaten, alone in the kitchen, and now it was her turn to relax and let the hours go by as the men talked about the work they had accomplished on the house that day and also the work that was still to be done. It appeared to her that very few men could talk about the present. It was always what happened or what will happen. She sat placidly, invisibly, at the table and they would only talk to her when they needed more of something, more drink or more tortillas or another knife for Rafael since he had dropped his while trying to cut into his chicken. The world of men seemed quite boring to her. All that empty conversation, all those stories that never said anything; never added anything. Men did not seem to be involved in complicated plots or plans. Even though she could not have added rooms to a house, something within her said that it was actually quite easy, that in reality, everything done by men was ridiculously easy and straightforward. This only led her to believe that since men were so simple, their happiness should also be easy to provide. Feed a man, let him touch you every now and then, be quiet when he's aggravated by things outside the house, and respect him in front of other men, and he'll be happy. As she saw Juancho and Felipe and Rafael, eating and slurping lime water and laughing at each other, she realized that she was already a mother to them. They needed her more than they were willing to admit or were clever enough to know. As she sat at the table that night, she smiled to herself. She imagined her future. She saw her children sitting around the table, waiting for her to sit with them to eat.

"Lupita," Felipe said, "do you have something stronger to drink?"

"I have just the thing," Lupita said and she stood up from her chair and brought them a bottle of mezcal and some sunflower seeds. "Just don't break anything," she said as she put the bottle on the table.

“What a great host,” said Rafael who immediately began pouring himself a glass of mescal. Juancho again held her hand but she said she was going for a walk, to buy some sweet bread from the bakery.

“Are you sure you don’t want a drink?” Felipe asked her.

“No. You hard working men go ahead and toast without me.”

“Fine,” said Felipe raising his glass to the other two who had already downed their first glass. “Orale, compita, wait for me.”

“You’re too slow to draw, Felipito,” Juancho said.

As Lupita went out the door she could hear their laughter, high and excited like the kids she had heard playing outside her house that day.

*

Once she made it to the plaza, Lupita walked around mindlessly, looking at families who had shared her need for an evening walk. There were also couples, sitting together at the foot of trees. She could hear their whispers as she walked past. There were old couples too walking hand in hand. She wondered what Juancho would say to her fifty or sixty years from now. Would he still hold her hand and kiss it? Would he still remind her to mind the salt in his *mole con pollo*? An old couple went past her and the old woman who was holding her husband’s arm smiled and winked at her as if to answer her question.

She went into the bakery. The baker barely looked up when she came in. It was a small room, four walls and a glass top counter. The bread was laid out on a large table at the

center of the room. The man sat behind the counter on a stool. He was dozing off and his head tilted from one side to the other. Lupita grabbed a tray and went around the bread table.

She was picking out Juancho's favorite bread, *ojo de buey*, when Alicia, came in. Her face seemed tight and Lupita could tell from the way she looked at her that Felipe had not told her that he was having dinner at her house.

"Good evening," Lupita said to her yet Alicia went past her as if she wasn't there. She walked up to the counter, tapped her hand on the glass to awaken the man on the stool. His eyes opened slowly then at once very widely.

"Sorry señora, it's been a long day."

"Sorry to wake you, Ramiro, but..." She leaned in, standing on her toes, her body halfway over the counter, and whispered something in the man's ear. Ramiro eyes remained still and then a flash of recognition or clarity came over them.

"Yes. Yes. It's in the back," he said, and he retired behind a thin, red curtain through which one could clearly see where Ramiro made the bread. There was a big table, cluttered with different trays and bowls and mixing utensils. From underneath the table Ramiro took out a basket covered by a thin cotton cloth. He uncovered the linen and reached in. He came back through the curtain and placed the basket on the counter. All this time, Alicia had stood behind the counter. She never turned to look at Lupita who was now standing a few feet behind her, waiting to pay for her bread.

"All I have is three-day old. It's hard as a stone but maybe with soup it could work." Alicia glared at Ramiro who had forgotten the secrecy of her request. Nobody wants to be seen buying yesterday's bread. Lupita could not pretend she didn't hear Ramiro. It was too late to turn around and pretend she was still admiring the pastries. But something made her

feel for Alicia—who had taken a small plastic bag from her bosom and was now counting her coins, placing them one by one on the counter. Lupita approached her.

“You know what I’d make, Alicia?” she said even though Alicia would not acknowledge her. “I’d make *Capirotada* with bread like that.”

Ramiro and Lupita looked at each other while Alicia kept placing coins on the glass. “All you need is a little *pillonzilla*, some cinnamon, a little bit a raisins and some fresh white cheese.” Lupita waited for a response but nothing came out of Alicia’s mouth. She was now putting her empty plastic bag back in her bosom.

“My wife makes *molletes*,” said Ramiro with a forced smile.

“Oh, yes, I completely forgot about those,” said Lupita enthusiastically. “My Juancho loves them too. And I’m sure Felipe would enjoy them for lunch tomorrow.”

Alicia pushed the coins across the counter. She pulled a long strand of black hair from her face to its original place behind the curve of her ear and then she asked Ramiro to bag the bread. Ramiro emptied the bread from the basket into a paper bag and handed it to Alicia who thanked him, turned around and headed for the door. With one hand on the doorknob she finally spoke to them.

“The bread is to feed the canaries. They don’t mind old bread.”

Her face was stern yet not hostile. Her eyes glowed but her stare was deep and mysterious, like a great darkness. Ramiro and Lupita found themselves speechless for an instant and before they could begin to apologize she was gone.

When Lupita came back from town she found that Juancho, Felipe and Rafael were gone. Usually this meant that they had run out of liquor and had to go to the cantina. The

empty dishes were left on the table, along with everything else—tortillas, glasses, a burned out candle, an overflowing ashtray, and Juancho's smelly shirt on one of the chairs. Lupita put away the bread and cleaned the table. Then she made some coffee for herself and lit a cigarette. She sat at her clean table, alone, daydreaming about the life she'd have once her children were born. Juancho would stop going to the cantina. Her house would have two more rooms with wide windows, to let the light in. Felipe would stay with Alicia instead of coming over so often, and Alicia would appreciate him more, would not resent him so much for leaving her alone all night. Juancho would see what a good mother Lupita was and would love to give her more children and would work a lot harder to provide for them. Eventually they'd have to build more rooms to the house, maybe a second floor since their lot wasn't very big, and people usually build up anyway, that's what everyone does when they run out of land. Lupita smoked and smoked that night and her dreams became more and more alive, more real in her head. She could see her children, running in the street, playing soccer with the neighbor kids. Maybe Alicia and her would become friends if her children were friends with her son. Maybe Sebastian could teach her children about canaries and then Lupita would go to the baker and ask for old bread, and there would be nothing to be ashamed of. "it's for my friend's canaries," she imagined herself saying to Ramiro.

Lupita put out her last cigarette and then she heard footsteps outside the door. Juancho was trying to find the right key and then Lupita saw his keys hanging by a string from a nail on the wall. She smiled, even though she was tired, and went to the door.

"You forgot your keys *borracho*."

"*Querida*, I think I lost my keys in the street," said Juancho.

"You're going to wake everyone. *Cállate hombre*."

“*Querida*...let me in. I don’ have keys,” he said and began to bang on the door, at first lightly but then louder and louder.

“Ok, ok. But that’s the last time for forget your keys,” she said. When she opened the door Juancho almost fell on top of her, for he had been resting his body against the door. While she carried him to bed he whispered things in her ear, meaningless things like: “I’m the best fisherman in the whole world, Lupita, and the best at catching fish too.” He was charming when he was drunk and always a gentleman. He wasn’t an intense man when he drank. He’d usually fall asleep talking about his plans or whatever story that had happened at the cantina. She covered him with a blanket and went back to the kitchen. Juancho called her name from the bedroom.

“Lupita! Me and Felipe are going to build you the best rooms you have ever seen,” he yelled.

“I know you will, *cariño*.” From the window she could see the moon shining on the sea.

“I mean it. Rafael might leave for the city, but Felipe and me will finish it in time. Then we can have our baby, our son.”

Lupita came into the room and saw Juancho lying on the bed facing the ceiling. She came and lay next to him. She caressed his chest and felt him breathing in and out.

“We don’t have to wait that long to have a baby. I don’t care if the rooms are never built. We could still have our baby with us,” she said.

“No, first the rooms. First the house and then...” he was saying but he feel asleep.

Lupita stayed up that night for a few hours, next to Juancho. She felt like a flower must feel before it blooms or like a bird must feel before it breaks out of its egg; like there was a whole world, a whole life, that was waiting for her, counting the days until her arrival. These moments of her life would soon ripen and fall away. And it was only a matter of time before her real life took its shape. As she finally drifted off to sleep she heard their voices—her children's voices calling her by name.

8. *El canto de los pájaros*

Felipe bought the canaries the next day after he and Alicia had fought over how much time Felipe spent at Juancho's house. Alicia had accused him of secretly loving Lupita. Felipe accused her of being incredibly stupid. They fought into the night and Felipe had to sleep on the floor in the living room. He didn't sleep at all. Felipe waited until daylight started to brighten the room and then he got dressed and left. It was Saturday, so he went to the market hoping to get lost in the crowd for a while.

When he arrived at the market, it was so early that only the merchants were there, setting up their tents and unloading merchandise. Felipe bought a small bottle of mescal at the corner liquor store and went down the streets of the town, sipping the strong liquid and whistling a disjointed tune. The overcast skies depressed him and he struggled to take each step. For a while he followed a white dog, a stray, until it ran down an alley chasing after something. Felipe sighed and took a gulp of the mescal.

When he turned at the next corner, he saw coming down the street, a woman carrying a large cage on her back, filled with colorful birds. Yellow. Green. Blue. White. The colors contrasted sharply against the drabness of the street and Felipe's mood. The woman's hair covered her face and when she passed next to Felipe the birds began to sing. The woman turned around and looked up toward him. She smiled. Felipe was surprised by her simple beauty. Her brown eyes focused on him and she never looked away. It made him slightly nervous.

"I don't know where they get the spirit to sing," he said. "The day seems so sad."

"Maybe they know something we don't," she said.

Felipe came close to the cage and put his finger through the wire bars.

“They’re so beautiful,” he said.

He whistled, imitating the songs the birds sang for him. He got lost in the music they shared for a moment.

“I’m very fortunate,” she said. “I attract beautiful beings.”

They walked together, at times just looking at each other. Felipe had the feeling that she had met her before. Her smile was warm and captivating. At times it was hard to tell whether she was reciting poetry or if the words that came from her mouth were really her own.

“Are you a fisherman?” she asked.

“I am. Is it easy to tell?”

“See, instead of plucking fish from their lives at sea. You should protect something. A feathered thing from dying of sadness.” She pointed with her fingertips to the birds in her cage.

“I don’t enjoy killing fish,” he said.

“Yes, yes. That’s what they all say. ‘I’m just doing what I’m meant to be doing. I’m a fisherman and that’s what I do and who I am.’ You see, birds—and of course all the other little creatures too—but especially birds, are born caged. They are like men and women that way. They’re trapped and we are trapped. No matter where they are, they know they can’t stay. They don’t belong. So they and we keep flying and flying. Trying to find that perfect spot, a wonderful place we believe exists, only it doesn’t. And we search all our lives looking for this *heaven*.”

“until what?” he said.

“until we die,” she said smiling.

They left the market streets behind and arrived at the center of the plaza. The woman placed the cage down on the ground and stretched her back. The birds’ wings fluttered against the wire in the cages. This woman, this bird merchant, talked in ways Felipe had never heard. He thought he was the only one who wondered and questioned life and death and such things.

“So life is a waste of time?” he asked.

“Why do you say that?”

“If there is no heaven and we can never find happiness then what is the point of all of this? Why are we trying so hard?”

“You tell me,” she said.

“For love?” he said.

She sat on the ground and removed her *huaraches*. She wore a silver ring in her toe. The wind blew her skirt up a little and Felipe saw her firm thighs and her knees.

“Love?” she said.

She kneeled in front of the cage and reached inside. She took out a dead bird. Felipe hadn’t noticed it before. She motioned for him to kneel beside her and he did. They sat down facing each other and she opened her palm holding the dead bird.

“What do you see? She asked him.

“A dead bird.”

“Ok, but there is much more to it than that, isn’t there?”

“What do you mean?”

“There is more than a dead bird on my hand. More than its bones and muscles and torn feathers. More than its eyes closed.”

Felipe got closer to her hand to inspect the bird. He touched the bird's chest and the tip of its beak. He stretched its wings and admired the vibrant colors. He even blew gently on it to make the delicate feathers move. The bird merchant closed her eyes and spoke again, this time her voice was softer, almost a whisper.

“Beyond the beauty that lies before us, there is a promise kept,” she said. Her face radiated peace and old wisdom.

“In my hand I hold a dream fulfilled. An empty cage. Do you see?”

“An empty cage,” Felipe said looking down at the dead bird in her hand and then looking up at her beautiful face. She opened her eyes and he understood that within that moment she had somehow opened a new place in his mind and his heart.

The bird merchant stood and walked over to the bushes, beneath the forgotten statue of the town's founder, and he threw the dead bird in the dirt.

*

Alicia was sweeping the floor by the front door when she saw Felipe come up the street, smiling at her exaggeratedly and carrying a big wire birdcage that was half as tall as he was.

“What did you do, Felipe?” Alicia yelled with a tone that caused Felipe to stop whistling.

“I just thought the house needed a touch of sweetness.”

“I’m not keeping some loud parrot or anything like that!”

“Think of it as a peace offering,” he said.

“Buy me food. That will make me more peaceful.”

She couldn’t help but smile at Felipe as he came closer to her. He was whistling again and making funny faces. Once he was in front of her, he put down the cage and the paper box, and kissed Alicia in the lips.

“What’s the cage for then?”

Felipe showed her the two canaries inside the paper box.

“They’ll sing for you while I’m away fishing.”

Alicia grabbed the bag and put her ear to it.

“They really want to get out,” she said.

They both put their ear against the bag.

“Well, let’s get them inside then” Felipe said.

“We’ll put them in the patio,” said Alicia.

9. *Sobre la hierba*

Saturday morning Sebastian and Carlita went to the fields to enjoy the warm weather; the clouds were pressed tightly to the ceiling in the sky and nothing below them moved. It was a quiet morning. The world was an abandoned cathedral.

Sebastian wore the same clothes he once wore to church, although now he was slightly taller. He'd even stopped by the barber and asked for a shave, much to the amusement of the men there. The old barber told Sebastian to come back in five years and the men again laughed, with the unrestrained malice of a bunch of cowards, who took solace in each other's age as some kind of achievement. Sebastian cursed them all and left to meet Carlita at the end of her street.

He leaned against a wall. His shoes were clean and his hair washed. He bit his fingernails and looked down the street, sometimes straightening his shirt and collar. Eventually he saw Carlita walking towards him in the distance; as she made his way towards him, wearing a blue dress and red sandals, all the words he'd planned to say to her, all those things that had plagued him since they first kissed under the pomegranate tree, sank suddenly within him.

She waved to him. Carlita was only a few houses away and he could hear her footsteps on the gravel. As she extended her arms to embrace him he felt a heavy block of ice suspended in his stomach.

It had been his idea to go to the fields, but she had teased him, mentioned that all he wanted was to kiss her. Yes, he wanted to, but not only that, he also wanted to get away from the town, to walk along the tall grass of the fields, breathe the air, smell it in her hair, lay

together in that lonely place under the clouds and the trees. He'd told her this and she held his hand and kissed it.

The fields were green and vast and on their way there they hardly spoke. She whistled at times, melodies unknown to Sebastian, and he kicked the same stone in front of their path. Eventually they left the road and followed a winding trail up the hill, which led them to a high plain overlooking the town and the sea beyond. It was close to noon. Sebastian wished he had brought water and perhaps fruit. It had been a pleasant walk, a quiet one, but still enjoyable.

“What do you think of the view?” he asked.

“I've never seen the town from here. It's small.”

“Once my father and I came here and we saw the town through binoculars,” said Sebastian as he placed his hands in front of his eyes, as if he were holding his father's only expensive and impractical possession.

“What are binoculars?”

“You see through them to see things that are far away. They're like glasses but much heavier. My father got them as a gift from my mother.” As he spoke, he kept holding the imaginary binoculars up to his eyes and looked towards the wide panorama; hills rising and falling like water, the town nestled tightly in the hills, like a mouse caught in the coil of a serpent, and the sea, infinitely laid-flat, blue and asleep, an opened mouth, abysmal. It all fit through his young fists and within Carlita's too as she joined him. They let time pass and looked at the world in front of them as if it were a distant place.

“I asked my father how far one could see with them. If I could see other towns and other places, farther away from here,” Sebastian said.

“What’d he say?” Carlita said still peaking through her hands.

“He said yes, one could see many faraway places but that he’d rather visit than admire them from a distance.”

“Me too,” said Carlita.

“Me too,” said Sebastian.

They turned to each other and Sebastian laughed because a white butterfly had landed on Carlita’s hair and she hadn’t noticed. She ran her fingers through her hair and it flew away, leaving a fine dust on her fingers.

They lay together looking up at the clouds. The chunk of ice in Sebastian’s stomach had melted during the walk and a new serenity had replaced it, perhaps the knowledge that Carlita would never judge him as other people, that he was safe with her. He wanted to tell her so many things, everything, to cherish Carlita now, to love her without restraint. He turned towards her. Her eyes were slightly closed, as when someone is about to fall asleep, and her mouth slightly open. She looked at the clouds.

“The night I first saw you, at church...the day my father disappeared,” he said, “I had no idea who I was.”

Carlita held his hand again.

“What do you mean?” she said.

“That day will always be the day when I walked all over town without knowing who I was. I was a pair of eyes, a head, legs and feet and fingers—a body—but whatever was inside me, I had never known.”

Carlita relaxed further and her eyes closed for a moment before they opened again to the sky.

“I asked my mother what this feeling was,” he said.

“What did she say?”

Sebastian stared at a cloud which resembled a woman sitting on a three-legged chair. The cloud slowly turned and advanced and the chair’s legs got longer and longer, and the woman’s hair drifted and drifted until Sebastian couldn’t see the woman anymore but a cloud.

“She said it was loneliness,” he said. “But I knew better than that.”

“Pain?” Carlita said.

“It’s horrible to admit it, but that day and especially the moment when I first saw you, I felt alive.”

A large cloud covered the sun and everything deepened. Sebastian turned to Carlita and stared at her. He could smell her.

“You are beautiful under this light,” he said.

“You’re very strange and... wonderful,” she said.

They kissed for a long time. Sebastian put his tongue in her mouth, almost without knowing why. He found that there was a lack of premeditation in the acts that followed. Just like they were alone in the fields that morning, they found themselves also alone in each other. No others had been to the places where they now ventured. No others had witnessed these lips, fingers, arms, and legs, this trembling longing to seep into the other through this fearful and desperate fall. When he put his tongue in her mouth she licked and bit it and offered in return her tongue, which he sucked on. It was a completely new sensation, which

made Carlita laugh and pull back, if only for a moment. Their eyes were half open and glazed. Sebastian held her close to him. They listened to their breathing and enjoyed what they shared just then, the knowledge of being caught in a whirlwind and the understanding that both of them were willing to let themselves be taken away by it, all the way down.

Sebastian stood. He studied the surroundings, making sure they were still alone. Carlita sat up and smiled at him. “See anybody?” She asked. Sebastian’s hands trembled a bit as he unbuttoned his shirt to reveal a skinny torso, hairless and pale in comparison to his face, which was darkened by a lifetime of living on the coast. She turned away from him, touching her face with one hand. She said nothing for a moment. Sebastian unbuckled his belt, unbuttoned his pants but kept them on. She turned to look at him. He smiled. The wind carried the ends of his shirt and made the grass sing low. She patted the grass and he came closer to her. Kneeling face to face, she kissed him again with more vigor. He could taste blood in his mouth but he didn’t feel any pain. Carlita took off his shirt and began kissing his shoulders and his neck. Sebastian placed his hands on her breasts and squeezed them. Carlita tugged at his crotch and the welcomed invasion made Sebastian say aloud what he was thinking, “Carlita.”

“I love you,” Sebastian whispered. “I love you with...” and that was all he said because Carlita had reached into his underpants. In reaction to this Sebastian seized her and pushed her back so that he was on top of her. What followed was a series of misguided thrusts and savage kissing. He reached under her dress and pulled down her underwear. He never had felt this much anticipation. He moved his hand gently up her thigh and into the wetness of her crotch and Carlita breathed in, startled. Sebastian’s fingers moved along her body, more in curiosity than in the interest of providing pleasure. He liked the softness of her

hair, down there. It was similar to his, perhaps the only thing. And Carlita tugged at his dick, also exploring its geography, intrigued by its sudden changes in texture and its pronounced ridges and unfamiliar presence in her hand. And so it went for a long time, kissing each other's everything. They kissed each other's parts. Carlita held Sebastian's head between her legs and wondered what would happen if someone saw them doing this. Sebastian looked at the sky while he ejaculated in Carlita's hand.

"It's warm," she said.

They listened to the grasshoppers chirping in the grass. They settled into their nudity and relaxed. They held each other. They were together on this. Sebastian kept thinking how beautiful Carlita's body was and how much of it had been revealed to him—all of it. Her navel surprised him; it was small and it sank into her belly as if it were pulled in, or sown, by invisible threads. And her breasts were pale compared to the rest of her body. But nothing had seemed more surprising than the place between her legs. He already wanted to see it again. In a way he had already forgotten what it was like.

"What do you want to do now?" he asked her.

"I don't mind staying for a little longer," she said.

"I hope you don't think this is all I wanted," he said.

"I know you care for me," she said. "I wouldn't have come here if I had doubts."

"I do more than care for you," Sebastian said. "I love you. I love you like I have never loved anyone before. I want to one day—"

"Move to those faraway places that you talked about? Take me there?"

"Yes. That's exactly what I'd like to do. Would you like that?"

Carlita got closer to him. He could feel her belly rising and falling between them, as she breathed. She sank her face into his chest.

“I don’t want to stay here, Carlita. My father told me I should get out of this town when I get old enough. I’m sure he would have left if it hadn’t been for my mother. Now, who knows what happened to him?”

“I’m sorry for your father,” she said. She lifted her face to meet his lips.

“You do love me, don’t you?” he said.

Carlita stared at him. She reached for his body again.

Despite his grief and how easily it had overtaken him, Carlita sparked a new fire in him and together they spent another bewildering hour among the grass. More probing fingers and lips, more arms and legs bound, more exploration into the solitude of adulthood; Carlita panting and gripping a fistful of grass, and Sebastian pushing and grinding his body against hers, enthralled, lost in the motions of her body, lost and fearless, ignoring the limits of their age and embracing the inevitable demise of their humble and broken childhood—gone was their innocence with the wind which combed the grass, gone with the clouds rolling by, gone forever, dead. And when they were done and spent, that’s what they looked like, lying asleep together on the hillside, like two young, beautiful, abandoned corpses, naked, drained, dreaming.

10. *La Pesca*

A week later, Juancho waited for Sebastian at the beach. It was early, the sky was still dark, but daybreak was coming. He was preparing the boat. He loaded the nets and two paddles. All he could hear was the crashing of the waves and the singing of the morning birds, waking up in the trees.

He was thinking about Felipe. How he had always been particularly excited about what happens during this time of day. Felipe often talked about strange things that came to him—his dreams sometimes or ideas that popped into this head that morning while he was getting ready in the warm darkness of his bedroom. Sometimes Juancho would wait outside Felipe's house, sipping some rum out of a bottle. It helped him to wake up. Even after all these years of fishing he had trouble waking up that early. But when Felipe would come outside, he always looked fresh and ready. Felipe and him would walk past the merchants in the market. They'd wave at them as they walked by. Felipe was always so friendly to people while Juancho was quiet and seldom spoke to the merchants or anybody else. Felipe and Juancho. What a pair of misfits they had been yet somehow they had manage to be friends all this time.

After readying the boat, Juancho thought about what spots in the bay they'd go fishing. He thought about where the fish would be that morning. He thought about the tides and the currents. In the past, Juancho would consider all these things while Felipe would go on and on about some dream he'd had, drawing elaborate diagrams on the sand. Juancho understood now that Felipe was a dreamer and he a realist, yet together they had found friendship and trust in their own ways of looking at the world.

He had everything ready in only a few minutes and he sat in the boat waiting for Sebastian to show up. That day was the first time after Felipe's death that he'd go out to sea with a partner. Sure, his new partner was young and inexperienced but he had a feeling that he'd be a fast learner like his father. Men like Felipe could adapt to situations, could learn the way to do things by simply doing them. Juancho hoped that Sebastian shared that ability too.

After a few minutes, Juancho spotted Sebastian walking across the beach. He had a long branch and was dragging it along the sand, making grooves. From a far Juancho noticed how similar to his father he was. Both of them walked like they were in no hurry to get anywhere, as if nothing were ever an issue worth hurrying for. Their strides were graceful, almost like dancing. And they both kept their eyes fixed on some distant point in the horizon. When Sebastian finally reached the boat, Juancho was already trying to push it into the water.

"Good morning, *muchacho*," he said but Sebastian didn't answer.

"I said good morning."

"Good morning," said Sebastian who was still holding that long branch. He was writing things in the sand while mindlessly whistling a tune Juancho had never heard before.

"Are you ready boy?"

Sebastian stopped whistling and threw the branch away.

"Help me push this thing into the water."

Sebastian didn't answer but he came over and pushed along with Juancho until the boat began to drag on the wet sand. They both kept pushing. Their faces were wet from the turf carried by the wind. When the boat finally began to float Juancho was so excited that he let out a big cry of victory.

“Keep pushing, *Sebas*, give it all you have until we make it over the first waves. Then the current will carry us in.”

Sebastian again didn't answer but he did what he was told. A gentle yet tall wave came crashing on them and Sebastian and Juancho got drenched.

“Son of a bitch,” said Juancho and Sebastian couldn't help but laugh a little. The boat made it over the waves and Juancho jumped in the boat and then helped Sebastian to aboard.

“We made it. That was the hard part. Now to find the fish.”

They traveled gently over the calm waters of the bay. Juancho looked back towards the beach and saw the line Sebastian had marked on the sand. It looked like a long snake was lying across the length of the beach. Then he turned to see the horizon and the sun that was coming up from underneath. He could see almost each individual ray of light as it made its way across the orange sky. There were birds, gulls, flying above them and the world seemed to get quieter and quieter as they got farther out to sea. The only sounds were the water hitting the sides of the boat and the clapping of the oar as it cut through the surface of the water. The sea was dark still, holding on to the colors of the recent night and Sebastian reached his hand over the boat and touched the surface. Juancho kept his eyes fixed on the sunrise and said,

“So how you been *muchacho*. I hear you got a girlfriend.”

“She's more than just a girlfriend,” Sebastian answered. And just then he turned around to face Juancho. Sebastian's eyes were rich with the color of the skies. Sebastian grabbed a stone that was lying inside the boat, under his seat. He examined it, rubbing the tips of his fingers over the surface and holding it close to his face.

“I think I’m in love,” Sebastian said as he threw the stone far into the direction of the sun. Juancho followed with his eyes the gentle flight of the stone until it landed swiftly in the water and disappeared. He adjusted his hat and smiled at Sebastian.

“You’re too young for that, *Sebas*.” With the energy he would have used for laughing Juancho pushed the boat onward with his oar.

“You think I’m too young to feel this way and I know,” Sebastian insisted. “My father would probably feel the same way but then he’d look into my eyes and see that I’m not lying about this.”

Juancho kept rowing.

“It’s not that I think you’re lying Sebas. I just think you’re too young to know what love is. You’re confusing it with something else.”

“What? Child’s play?”

“How old are you now Sebastian? Fifteen?”

“Fifteen and a half—but you see it’s not about how old I am. It’s deeper than that.”

“How could it be deeper? You’re just kids, *muchacho*. What do you and her know about love?”

“What did you and my father know about fishing? At least enough to get by, right? So there you go.”

Juancho recognized that phrase from Felipe. *There you go*, as if things were obvious to everyone, as if nothing needed further explanation, as if the rest of the world was simply not paying close attention.

They argued like this for a while, about the virtue of being older and the dangers of being young and the boat floated and was carried away by currents that Juancho hadn’t

noticed. Soon enough the boat was far from the bay and the chance to be pulled out to the open sea became painfully eminent to Juancho. Of course, he didn't say anything to Sebastian. First of all, he was just a boy and second, he didn't want to make it seem like he needed his help to navigate. Not after the boy had just said that thing about how Juancho could use some lessons in romancing a woman.

"We're a little farther out this time," Juancho said as he dropped the anchor. "we'll stay here a while and then we'll go west and come in from that side, back into the bay. The western currents will bring us back home, ok?" He seemed to be saying this to himself rather than to Sebastian whose unawareness of the possible danger of the situation, made it easier for Juancho to remain calm. This bay and its currents had taken many boats out to sea. Juancho's boat had no engine. He'd been meaning to replace it but they hardly ever used it since it scared the fish. So now they were simply floating, at the mercy of the currents. Still, Juancho cast the nets off on one side of the boat and saw them sink and disappear in the deep blue water.

As the two of them saw the nets disappear beneath them Sebastian said something that caught Juancho completely off guard.

"Juancho, what happened to my father?"

He sat back on the boat and watched the clouds rolling over each other like waves.

"You were the only one there. Now tell me what happened."

Juancho lowered his hat so that it covered his eyes and he stood up.

"Do you think I had something to do with it?"

"I think you know the truth but you're too much of a coward to say it."

“Don’t speak to me that way. I was there the next morning after you were born. I saw the look on your parents’ eyes. I’ve been a friend of your father’s since we were just dumb boys like you.”

“It all means nothing if in the end you let him die.”

“Let him die? Where do you get this rubbish from?”

“Everyone in town thinks you had a hand in his death.”

“Those are lies—it’s me *Sebas*. Why would I do any harm to your father?”

“Your wife can’t have any kids, maybe you want to try with my mom.”

Juancho stood up and held Sebastian by his shirt—there was no way this conversation could ever reach Alicia and they both knew it.

“Take that back, you little shit.”

“You’re never going to be with my mom!”

“What’s the problem with you? Is that really who you think I am?” Juancho said while looking at Sebas with a face that seemed broken, distorted.

Juancho pushed Sebastian back into his seat. He reached inside a plastic bag that was between his feet and took out of bottle of rum that was half empty. He drank a gulp of it and then he offered the bottle to Sebastian.

“Take it,” he said.

Sebastian didn’t want it.

“Take it I said.”

There were tears rolling down Juancho’s eyes. Sebastian took the bottle.

“Drink.”

Again Sebastian denied him.

“I’ll tell your mother I found you drinking rum with your girlfriend.”

Sebastian stared at Juancho with disbelief. He then unscrewed the cap and took a swig. The rum made him cough wildly. His face blushed and his stomach felt like it was on fire.

“Don’t play with me, *muchacho*. If we’re going to work together then you do what I tell you to do. I’m your father’s best friend. If I think that you’re too young to know anything about love then you believe me. And if I say I don’t know what happened to your father then you should believe me. If there is anybody in this town that should be on my side it’s you, *muchacho*. I loved your father like a brother. Don’t insult his memory with this venomous accusations.”

“I just want to know what happened,” said Sebastian with tears in his eyes.

“When you’re ready to listen to me we’ll talk. Not sooner or later.”

Sebastian gave him back the bottle of rum. Juancho sat back down and put the bottle away.

He had the boy pull the nets while he pulled up the anchor. When he turned he saw that there were only a few fish caught in the mesh.

“No problem, Sebastian,” Juancho said. “we’ll do better on your next try.”

“Oh. How do you know?”

“Well, now that we’re partners,” Juancho said while shaking Sebastian’s hand, “the sea will feel better about giving us her gifts.”

Together, Juancho and Sebastian threw back into the water the few fish that had gotten caught in the net. When they were done, Juancho handed Sebastian a paddle and they started paddling towards the shore. As the town drew nearer, Sebastian’s heart grew heavy.

Perhaps it was true that nobody really knew what happened to his father. Maybe this question would hang over his head for the rest of his life.

The idea was unbearable, like the rum still burning in his mouth.

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“What else was my father like?” asked Sebastian as they dragged the boat on the wet sand. The weather had made for good fishing—clear sky and gentle breezes. They’d dropped their cargo at the port, near the market and they were done for the day. Juancho had told Sebastian that they should be friends—his father would have wanted it that way.

“Well,” Juancho said, “your father was a simple man but his life was very complicated.” He laughed as if he had remembered an old joke and Sebastian smiled a little.

“Most people get up in the morning and know to some degree what the day will be like for them—at least in some way they know.” Juancho was unloading the boat and Sebastian sat on the sand.

“But for your father every day was a great mystery.”

After the boat was empty he covered it with a long tarp, tying the ends with rope.

“A lot of help you are, *muchacho*. Just like your father; another dreamer.”

“If you knew him so well why can’t you tell me what happened to him? You’re the only one that knows.”

Sebastian kept looking at his feet and digging them into the sand.

“There is someone else who knows what happened. There must be because I don’t know.”

Seeing that Sebastian clearly did not believe him, Juancho approached him, got close so he could smell the saltwater in his hair.

“You think you knew your father boy? More than me? I knew that man...many times better than he knew himself.”

“If you don’t know then...”

“I’m telling you the truth Sebas. If I’m the key to this mystery then we won’t ever know for sure what happened to your father. Your father told me the night before he died, that he was tired of this town. Tired of his life in it and that he wanted to find some real change, ‘for better or worse’ he said. But I didn’t believe him because your father and I always talked about change and how tired we were of living in this shit town, of always doing the same thing and never getting enough out of it.”

“What else did he say?”

“Nothing else. That he had a new friend.”

“New friend? Who?”

“Half of the time, your father’s ideas and the way he explained them to me made all the sense in the world. But the rest of the time I usually got lost in the things he said. It was as if he could hypnotize me with the sound of his words.”

“So, who is the new friend?”

“I learned not to question much of what he said sometimes because, as I said, your father and I talked about change but nothing ever changed. New friends, new philosophies, new dreams—but even new jobs aren’t enough to change a life. So I figured let him have his new friends if he needs them and he’ll come around when he tires of them...as he’d usually do with everything else.”

After saying this, Juancho offered his hand to Sebastian. Sebastian looked him in the eye and held his hand.

“Look,” Juancho said, “obviously we need to talk more about this. Do you want to have lunch with me and Lupita?”

“Are you sure? Lupita won’t mind?”

“Mind? She loves to have people over. Your father used to come over all the time.”

“Alright, then.”

Lupita had been expecting Juancho to bring Sebastian over for lunch one day and that day had finally come. So she rushed inside and made herself presentable. She put her hair in a ponytail and washed her face. She quickly changed from the clothes she was wearing to something lively; a dress that she wore on occasion when Juancho brought his friends over. She felt it was the duty of a wife to look presentable, so that other men thought Juancho was a lucky man to have found such a lovely woman for a wife. She cleaned the table, which was covered with newspapers and some plates. She lit the stove and began warming up some beans and rice. She cut fresh limes to make limewater and fired up the *comal* to make *tortillas*. By the time Juancho and Sebastian arrived the house was warm and the scent of food was in the air. Juancho opened the door that lead to the kitchen and sniffed the air while looking at Sebastian.

“I love to come home to a warm meal,” he said and motioned for Sebastian to sniff the air too. They stood there a moment, while their stomachs growled and then Lupita appeared through a hallway and greeted them.

“There they are. The two most hardworking men in town,” she came closer and hugged Juancho and kissed him on the forehead. Then she came around to Sebastian and gave him a tight hug. “Look how you’ve grown *muchacho*. You’re almost a man.”

Sebastian blushed a little and said smiling, “Almost.”

They washed their hands outside in the backyard. There was a *pileta* where Lupita washed clothes and cleaned her flowers. Juancho gave Sebastian a big pink brick of soap and said with a smirk, “we’re very clean people here.”

Sebastian took off his shirt and Juancho filled the pileta with cold water. Sebastian reached in, cupped water in his hands, and brought it to his face and arms. Juancho stood by and then gave him the soap. “So, are you sure Lupita doesn’t mind having me over?” Sebastian said.

“I’m telling you she loves it when I bring people over. Just relax, ok?”

“Ok.”

He rinsed his face and arms; the steam from the water rising a little, thick with the scent of Lupita’s roses which she had cut that morning. Then Juancho gave Sebastian one of his shirts that was hanging from the nearby clothesline and said, “Go inside. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Sebastian came in and saw the roses on the table and Lupita standing over the stove, humming something to herself. He didn’t want to interrupt her so he stood next to the table and waited. After a moment Lupita said, “You remind me of your father, Sebastian. I guess it’s only natural but I just wanted to say it anyway.”

“Really?” said Sebastian. “What about him?”

“Well, his presence mostly. He always had an air of an angel of some kind. I felt that something nice was going to happen whenever he was around. And it usually did.”

“An angel huh?”

“Well, as angelic as men can ever get,” she said and she turned to see him. Their eyes met and they laughed a little.

“But have a seat, honey, you must be hungry.”

“That I am,” said Sebastian pulling up a chair.

“So tell me, Sebastian, how’s the fishing coming?”

“It’s hard work. I never knew how hard my father worked. I knew he was a hard worker but I guess I never imagined it would be like that.” Lupita was nodding at every word he said and finally said, “So how do you like walking in your father’s shoes?”

“I respect him so much more. I admire him...more”

“That’s great news,” she said and turned the tortillas over in the *comal*. “In today’s world it isn’t often that someone hears a son speak like that about his father. Your mother must be proud. How is she by the way?”

“She’s quiet. But she’s beginning to talk more every day.”

“Oh, that’s good. It will take time, you know, but that’s a good sign.” Juancho came in and said, “What’s a good sign?”

“Alicia is feeling a little better,” said Lupita tending to the pot of beans on the stove.

“Your mother needs you right now, *muchacho*,” said Juancho, “you can’t be abandoning her like you’ve been doing lately.”

“He doesn’t do that, do you Sebastian?” Lupita said.

“I wouldn’t call it that. She just didn’t seem to care whether I was there or not. And I understand that right now she’s not herself, not yet, so I try not to take it personally.”

“Personally?” said Lupita and her face tightened like a bunched up rag. “I say talk to her about it. You need your mother too. You two are going through something most people can’t imagine. You need each other.”

Juancho looked at Sebastian and rolled up his eyes. “Woman, come on. The boy is doing everything he can right now. I was just saying that he should make sure his mother is ok, instead of going after some young girl and calling it love.”

“What?” Lupita said and she sat down with them at the kitchen. “What girl?”

“You know that woman that came from the city? Well, I guess you can call Sebastian here, the cosmopolitan Don Juan.”

“With that sweet girl?” said Lupita covering her mouth with one hand.

“Her name is Carla,” said Sebastian. There was silence after that. All that could be heard were the beans boiling on the pot.

“But she’s so young.” Lupita said.

“Not younger than you were when you met me,” said Juancho as she stood up to turn down the heat on the beans that threatened to boil over.

“Yes, but that was different. It was love. We were in love.”

Sebastian reached and grabbed one of the roses from the vase in front of him. He felt the smooth petals between his fingers. He brought the rose close to his face and smelled it. Juancho and Lupita simply looked at him. Then Sebastian gave the flower to Lupita and said, “It’s love for us too. We are in love.” Juancho cleared his throat and Lupita got up and began

to serve the food. Juancho was helping her and the two were next to each other over the stove.

“He’s quite a young man isn’t he?” Juancho whispered.

“He certainly has his father in him.” she said smiling.

After lunch, while Lupita was clearing the table, Juancho said, while picking his teeth with a fork, “So Sebastian wants to know about his father.”

“Oh, what a good soul that man had,” Lupita said while she rinsed the dishes in the sink.

“Yeah, but I want to tell him other stories about him that he may not expect.” Juancho put the fork down and rubbed his belly. “Do you remember Carmen?” he said to Lupita and her voice grew louder, “Don’t tell him that story, he’s just a kid.”

“Well, you should have seen him today Lupita. We were out there fishing and he was doing everything I told him to do and he was paying attention to what we were doing. I think he’s more of a man today. Maybe he deserves to hear this.”

“I can’t hear that story anymore.” Said lupita. She put all the dishes in the sink, covered the pots and said, “Sebastian, whatever this man is going to tell you is a bunch of lies. This story has had more versions than any piece of gossip I’ve ever heard. Don’t believe it.”

“Leave him alone, Lupita. Let him decide if it rings true or not.”

“It was nice having you here Sebastian. Please feel free to come back whenever you want. And please don’t let his stories get to you. He’s just a sad, sad man,” she said and gave him another hug.

“So where are you going,” Juancho asked.

“I’m going to take walk,” she said. “Maybe I’ll tell Sebastian’s mother that he’s here with us. In case she’s wondering.” Sebastian and Juancho waited for the sound of the door closing and then Juancho took out his rum and a lit a cigarette.

“You want some?” he said smiling and Sebastian refused politely. “Well, more for me.”

Juancho told Sebastian that his father wasn’t all work and family, that at least in his youth he had more natural inclinations, like women and fighting drunk fishermen. They sat facing each other at the kitchen table and through the thick cloud of Juancho’s cigarette smoke, Sebastian could see his eyes shining. Juancho took a swig from the bottle of rum and began this story.

“One time, when your father and I were about your age or so, maybe a little older, we used to work at the market, unloading trucks—big sacks of sugar or flour and sometimes even animals, like chickens or pigs. Anyway, after a long shift one night we were coming back home and your father took out a bottle of liquor he had stolen from his father. So we went into the alley, the one behind the market and drank half of the bottle, sitting on some garbage drums. Across the alley there was a window and just as we were thinking that things could not get any better, the light came on and there through the see-through curtains we saw a woman. She was laying on her bed and she was naked.” At this point in the story Juancho smiled and took another swig of rum and Sebastian, who had been listening intently, now sat closer to the table and smiled.

“So I guess you wonder if she was beautiful.”

“I guess the question crossed my mind,” said Sebastian and Juancho offered him rum again but again he refused.

“Well, I guess you could say that she was beautiful but not in the usual way. First of all, she wasn’t just lying there like some muse or anything. She was being massaged by this tiny, slim, *slim*, stick of a woman with long arms and big giant hands.” Sebastian thought about what Lupita had said regarding the veracity of the tale but he still laughed and enjoyed it. “Your father and I,” Juancho continued, “elbowed each other trying to hold on to our excitement because believe it or not, she was the first naked woman we had ever seen—in real life that is. And this woman, well, she was also very fat and her skin was covered in some kind of oil, for the massage you see, but she had so much oil that her skin gave off light like the scales on a fish out of water.”

“What?” Sebastian said and finally reached for the bottle of rum and took a swig.

“Yes, it’s true. Your father and I came down from the garbage drums and got really close to the window. The woman was laying face up on her bed which was next to the window and the other woman was standing over her, moving her hands over her body which was so full and, you know, voluptuous, that it made us a little dizzy.”

“So was she beautiful or not?”

“Yes, *muchacho*! She had a face from another world. It was round and distinguished, like an expensive doll. And the way she lay there, completely unmasked, giving her body over to who ever cared to look through the window...” Juancho struggled either to remember or to find the words he was looking for until he simply said, “She was amazing. Your father and I stood there watching her. It rained that night but we stayed there, just staring at her.”

Juancho put out his cigarette and lit another one. He offered one to Sebastian but then he changed his mind and put the cigarettes away in his shirt pocket.

“So then what happened?” Sebastian asked while reaching for the bottle once more only this time Juacho stopped him by saying, “ok, *muchacho*, you’re not going home with rum in your breath so...maybe another time you can spend the night here and we’ll tell stories.”

“Ok then,” Sebastian said, “but finish your story then.”

“Fine. So then the lady, the skinny lady, leaves, goes to the other room. The naked woman is looking at the ceiling with a detached look on her face and what looks like a smile and she’s running her hands up and down her belly. Then we heard a door opening right next to us and we ran like the wind out of there. When I looked back we saw the skinny woman come out of the alley, carrying a small suitcase and an umbrella.” Juancho stood up and got some limewater for Sebastian. He poured the glass and set it in front of him. “Your father and I walked home and I will never forget the look in his eyes when he said ‘We are going back tomorrow.’ I said sure like it was a given but it wasn’t until later that day when we got back to the alley that I realized that he did not intend to just look through the window like I had thought we would.”

Sebastian reached for the glass of limewater and drank it all in one sip. He then poured himself another glass from the pitcher Juancho had left on the table. Juancho saw that Sebastian’s hands looked a lot like Felipe’s hands, the way they grabbed the pitcher, the way they held things; secure. “So then?” said Sebastian as he put the empty glass down and took a breath.

“Well, we worked on the trucks that evening—the shipment that day was brown sugar, flour, etc—anyway I was beat but I guess your father wasn’t. He had always been stronger than me and that night it was no different. We left the market and I had forgotten about what we were going to do that night so I almost kept going when your father turned the corner and then whistled. Anyway, so I remembered and then we started running toward the alley. We got the house and the window was dark. I was disappointed but your father saw the door was open and he smiled at me with that devilish smile he’d get sometimes when he was bad. But I was too afraid to go in and he went in on his own but he made me promise I’d wait for him. So I did. I waited about twenty minutes or so. I sat on the garbage drums and drank what we had left of our bottle of liquor. Then, just when I was thinking of going home, your father came out through the door along with the woman. They were holding arms and she looked more beautiful than the previous night. Your father seemed like a stranger to me. I came over and said hello and she said her name was Carmen. We all stood there a second and then she said, ‘so Felipe here tells me you guys saw me last night through the window.’ I was frozen and gave your father a blank stare but he smiled again and said, ‘we didn’t mean to. It just happened.’” Sebastian was holding the empty glass, sipping on the last few drops of lime water that were left in it. The pitcher was empty and his eyes were burning from all the smoke of Juancho’s cigarettes. “My father was smooth with women?” he said smiling. “oh yes, son. Your father was the man and that night we spent the night in Carmen’s house, drinking and playing cards.”

“And that’s it. Just playing cards?”

“Well, Sebastian, I don’t mean to elaborate on the reputation of Doña Carmen. You know, she’s now married to the police Captain, after all.”

Both of them started laughing. Juancho's eyes were tearful and so were Sebastian's. Felipe was gone but he had left behind some stories to tell. Sebastian imagined his father, plunging into the body of that voluptuous Carmen. He wondered if him and his father could have been friends and what a young Felipe would have thought of him. Would Felipe like him? Would he think he was strange or too quiet? Would he wait for him outside his house to go to work or would he simply be another stranger, tipping his hat at him and looking on as strangers do when they walk past.

11. *Una cabaña a la orilla del barranco*

The bird merchant, that woman who seemed ageless and came and went like the sea, had her house perched upon a hill, near the edge of a cliff people called *Barranco Negro*—men had died there before, victims of inebriation of either body, heart, or mind. The townspeople believed there were bodies at the bottom of the cliff, picked-over bones, left behind by vultures, cracked skulls looking up at the sun, surrendered.

Felipe found one of the canaries sitting at the floor of the cage, its feathers puffed up and its beak touching the bottom of the cage. The other canary was sitting on its perch and looked down every now and then to the other one. Felipe opened the cage and reached in and the bird didn't try to get away, instead it willingly climbed onto his hand. Something was wrong with it. Its eyes were glazed and it felt heavy, as if it was filled with sand. Felipe took the bird out of the cage and wrapped it in one of Alicia's handkerchiefs, so only its head poked out at the top. The bird didn't make a sound.

Felipe went to town in search of the bird merchant yet the woman wasn't at the plaza or the market; she wasn't hunkering beneath the shadow of the trees near the church either. He asked around and nobody seemed to know where she had gone or when she'd return. He looked at the bird. He knew it was in trouble and he kept asking other merchants if they knew where to find her. Finally, a man with a big leather hat and snake boots told him that she lived two kilometers past *Barranco Negro*, that she had a house there. The man offered to take him there but only if he promised to help him load some heavy boxes into his truck. They put the canary inside the truck's cabin, left a window open so the bird wouldn't roast and they went to work. They loaded two pallets of unlabeled boxes into the truck.

“What’s in these?” Felipe asked while wiping sweat off his forehead.

“A lot of these,” the man said, pointing to his boots.

“How come they’re so heavy?”

“There’s a little something extra for the guys in the Capital; herbal tea for one of the Captain’s buddies in the force.”

“Herbal tea?”

“you know, *herbal tea*,” the man said.

The two of them laughed.

“I don’t have to tell you to keep that to yourself, now, do I?”

“You don’t have to worry.”

“I have a thing for spilling secrets,” the man said. “Don’t tell me yours.”

“Well, so far I don’t have any,” Felipe said feeling a momentary rush of pride. Aside from the usual stories one accumulates from childhood, the kinds of deeds one hopes will simply go away with age and time, Felipe had no secrets. He had at one point fallen in love with his teacher, Mrs. Rodriguez. He had written letters where he declared his love to her. Letters he later burned outside in the yard, using her mother’s matches—the same ones she used to light candles for *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, when his grandmother passed away at the age of ninety five. He also had stolen fruit from the market once, to test himself and his luck. But soon after he simply decided to do the right thing, make right decisions, to live a clean life—he was only fourteen when he reached that conclusion and since then, aside from the episode with Carmen, his conscience was clear. He had no secrets.

Aguirre clapped his gloved hands at the sight of boxes, neatly loaded and stacked inside the truck. “We are a good team. When I come back I’ll give you your cut for the muscle work.”

“Nah. But you can tell me where to find the bird merchant. That’s all I need.”

The man tugged at his groin and smiled furtively at Felipe.

“These local women don’t know how to please a man, huh? Got to find the good stuff outside of town. I know all about that. I do a lot of traveling on this truck.”

“No, no. My canary is sick and I’m just hoping—”

“Hey, buddy. Your secret’s safe with me. My canary could use a little help too.”

Aguirre padded Felipe on the shoulder and spit on the truck’s tire.

“No, you got it all wrong.”

“Relax, *hombre*. Let’s get your bird the attention it needs.”

They drove fast through the town’s narrow streets until they left the town behind. The truck struggled along that climbing dirt road leading to *Barranco Negro*. The windshield was cracked in front of Felipe and there was what appeared to be bullet holes in the door by his leg.

“These roads are dangerous sometimes. Can you believe I’ve been shot at?”

“Who shot at you? In the Capital?”

“No, *hermano*, right here. Once you leave the town you’re on your own. Ranchers or dumb kids, good for nothing, have fun shooting at you from the hills.”

Felipe looked around nervously. Outside the window nothing but fields and lonely trees, rolling mountains. Every now and then a white cross by the side of the road.

“I’m only kidding you man,” said Aguirre. “We’re all alone out here.”

Aguirre laughed and Felipe breathed out slowly.

“Those holes on the door are for ventilation. It gets hot as hell when you drive through the Sierra.”

A few minutes later they reached *Barranco Negro*, Aguirre brought the truck to a stop. Felipe looked at him with a blank face. Aguirre pointed to a dirt path between two old, crooked trees—their blooming flowers hung low and pink petals lay on the ground and were carried away with the breeze.

“Follow this road all the way to the house. It’s small but you’ll find it.”

“Alright,” Felipe said. “Are you sure this is it?”

“Completely, my friend. I’ve been up there before when I needed some bird bones for a love spell.” Aguirre smiled and shook Felipe’s hand, and held it.

“But don’t act suspicious, my friend. She can see you well before you get close to the house. And she’s known to have fired her rifle at strangers if she doesn’t feel like entertaining visitors.”

“Really? Maybe I shouldn’t have come then.”

Felipe looked at the bird. It’s eyes were half closed and its beak half-open.

“I’m kidding you man. *Carajo!* You’re gullible!”

Aguirre idled the engine and Felipe got out. The truck roared and drove away, leaving Felipe alone, covered by a cloud of dust that lingered and settled on around him. Felipe began walking up the road, every now and then stopping to examine the bird, to make sure it was still alive. There’d be no point in bringing a dead bird to the woman. She wouldn’t understand. She’d think he was strange and feel uncomfortable. The last thing he’d ever

want is to make anyone uncomfortable, specially a nice woman like that. Someone who appreciated everything—alive or dead—and who talked about things in a very different way; asked him questions nobody had yet asked him.

He walked for a few minutes, at times doubting Aguirre had given him the correct directions. Maybe it was the last of his little jokes. Maybe Aguirre didn't know anything about any bird lady and had only used him to load the truck. Felipe looked at the bird and felt cheated but then, at the next turn, through the waving grass he saw an old cabin, with a thin column of smoke coming from the chimney.

“So it's true. She lives all the way up here,” he said to himself and the bird. When he reached her house she found her sitting outside, in the porch, fanning her face with a long, red feather and smiling as if she had, for a long time, been expecting him. The cabin was indeed small, a miniature almost, with one window and a blue door. There were many small birdcages stacked one on top of the other by the side of the cabin. There were flowerbeds of many colors surrounding the house and what seemed like a vegetable garden on the other side of the house. It was a humble place but it didn't give the usual impression of poverty and desperation shared by most mountain cabins Felipe had seen in his life. The bird merchant stood and waited for him to get closer. She was barefoot, wearing a long linen dress embroidered with flowers. Her brown eyes reflected the kind of serenity Felipe had seen only in the eyes of men out at sea. Her hair was lighter than Alicia's.

“How are you?” Felipe said.

“Peaceful like the day. You? Tired of the ocean?” Her voice was gentle and melodious and the wind played with her hair.

“I have something for you,” he said and raised his hand to show the canary.

“Oh no,” she said but in her tone there was no alarm. “Bring it here.”

He walked up the steps to meet her and handed over the bird. She took it in her hands, which seemed soft and clean, and she brought the bird close to her face.

“You must know a lot about birds,” Felipe said.

“You spend enough time doing something, you get to know it well. But there’s no end to getting smarter. There’s always learning.”

“Fishing’s the same way,” said Felipe and he glanced toward the sea in the distance.

“Everything in life is like that,” she said.

She unwrapped the canary and set it on her palm, lying face up. It was a female, not bright yellow like the males but darker, brown. She extended its wings, revealing bright, hidden colors—yellows brighter than the males. She whispered something Felipe didn’t hear. Then she examined the bird’s body, the chest and the belly.

“I bet she can’t fly,” she said and opened her palm but the bird simply struggled to balance itself on her fingers.

“Something’s wrong. A bird that can’t fly isn’t right,” Felipe said.

“Well, she’s packed full of shit,” she declared. She looked the bird in the eyes and said, “It’s not getting enough water. She’s full of dried seed and she can’t shit.”

Laughter slowly overcame them both.

“She just needs a little nectar,” she said.

“So, it’ll be fine then?”

“Oh, yes. She’s just a feathered sack of poop, but she’ll be good in a day or two. That is if you don’t mind leaving her with me for a couple days.”

“Oh I don’t want to intrude on your day. You said it had been peaceful. I don’t mean to ruin it.” Felipe wished he knew her name.

“It’s no intrusion Felipe. No problem at all. There’s nothing I enjoy more than bringing them little birdies back to normal. You could say I have a gift for that.”

“That’s why I came to see you.”

Their eyes met for an instant.

“I also wanted to see you because I’ve been thinking about what you said that day. About how dead birds are kept promises.”

“And?”

“Well, I was thinking about my life, you know. And... I don’t know what you meant by promise.”

“I’ll show you.”

She held the bird in one hand and Felipe’s hand in the other. She walked with him to the side of the house where she kept her birds, in the shade and protected from the wind. The cages had a wooden frame with metal bars or wires. They were perfectly square and stacked in columns of six or seven cages high. As they approached them, the birds inside the cages began to chirp and sing. Felipe heard the fluttering of the bird’s wings and smiled as he saw the face of the bird lady soften, as if she were looking into a great valley of wild things.

“These birds came into the world already knowing what they had to do. They fought their way through shell and membrane, breathed the air new to them—like falling into another world—and opened their mouths so they could be fed, so they could grow and learn to fly, so they could sing. Then they’ll disappear again into the moment from where they

came. It was what they promised to do when they were created, they promised to come back.”

“And in dying they keep that promise,” Felipe said.

“I call it a promise but it’s really more of a contract. I’d like to believe we have a say in the matter. At least that’s how I would deal with it anyway.”

The woman smiled and Felipe stood there looking at her and she looked back at him, with those same pleading eyes he had seen the day he bought the canaries. He felt that something inside her was desperately lonely and in need. The wind was blowing gently and colorful feathers swirled around them.

The bird’s singing grew louder.

“I don’t know your name,” Felipe said after a moment. “I feel so sorry for showing up at your door with a sick bird and not even knowing your name. I’m sorry.”

“Maria,” she said.

She looked away at the surrounding mountains and the sea, a faint blue line far away. She opened an empty cage, held the bird by the opened door, and opened her palm. The canary stood on its two legs and skipped inside.

“Don’t be afraid, *cariño*. I’ll take care of you,” she said.

Felipe turned from her wall of cages and looked back towards the road he had traveled. Grey clouds moved slowly above them; it threatened to rain. The wind died in the trees. For a moment he felt as if something larger than them was unfolding, a great storm perhaps, rolling over everything like a great wave.

The birds were quiet and Maria and Felipe went inside. They sat on Maria’s bed and heard the rain falling outside.

“I spend a lot of time thinking about you,” he said.

“I think about you too.”

“I think we’re meant to do this,” he said.

He touched her hair and ran his fingers through it. She turned to him with a seriousness that seemed new to him.

“Do you really think so?” she said.

“Nothing is stopping me,” he said and held her face in his hands. “I’m changing the course of my life, from darkness to illumination, from fall to flight—”

Maria placed her fingers on his lips and said, “From death to life.”

12. El muerto vive

The sea had been violent the night before and left behind a heavy curtain of fog. There was a boat coming home after the storm. It crossed the bay slowly with two men on board—lanterns held up so they could see. The night had fallen. They entered the area of the bay where the water gets darker; below the surface weeds grow thick like a conifer forest. Nobody swims there. They floated over the seaweed and one of the men held the light by the side of the boat and yelled out. He saw a white hand sticking out of the water, a fist clenching weeds.

Felipe had been gone for three months.

PART II

*Con el atardecer
me iré de ti
me iré sin ti.*

*Me alejaré de aquí
con un dolor
dentro de mi.*

*Te juro, corazón,
que no es falta de amor
pero es mejor así*

*Un día comprenderás
que lo hice por tu bien
que todo fue por ti.²*

² *When dusk comes/ I will leave you/ I'll go without you/ I'll depart from here/ carrying a sorrow/ within me/ I swear, my heart/ that it's not for lack of love/ but it's better this way/ One day you'll understand/ this will you do good/ I did it all for you.*—Lyrics from *Cruz de Olvido*. Traditional Mexican Folksong. P.D.

13. *El patriarca*

That morning, the police Captain dispatched Alemán and two young officers to bring Felipe's body back and to deliver it to Dr. Neria, who was given the assignment of determining what had happened to Felipe, in other words to find out if there was sufficient evidence to support the Captain's latest theory that Juancho had killed him to get to Felipe's beautiful Alicia.

Alemán and his helpers took their boat to the area where the two frightened fishermen had told them they saw the hand and eventually the body. The two men left it where it was since they believed that bringing the body back to town was a job for the authorities. They said they were ignorant men who didn't know what to do. What they neglected to say was that they were deeply afraid; the body was horrifically changed, different—something had happened to it.

Alemán's boat arrived in the area and the two officers pointed to where seagulls were beginning to congregate. Alemán smiled.

"The birds found it too. Better hurry before they eat it all."

They brought the boat closer and the seagulls flew away but they remained circling above them; their silhouettes reflected in the water.

"How are we getting it out?" an officer said.

"You two are going in. I'll be here waiting for you."

The two officers looked at each other and began to undress. Through the dark surface they could see Felipe's head facing down and his fisted hands.

The men jumped in the water and felt the weeds all around them. They quickly moved toward Felipe and pulled him up from the weeds.

“Son of a bitch,” said Alemán at the sight of the body.

They wrapped the body in white cotton sheets and placed it on a plank of wood that used to be a door. The two officers were quiet on the way back to shore. They looked at the bulk beneath the sheets and held their clothes against their chest and tried to warm up. They cried, at times, quietly into their clothes, when Alemán wasn’t looking.

They loaded the body from the boat into Alemán’s pickup truck. Other fishermen and people from the town witnessed the scene, but they observed from a distance. Some removed their hats and christened themselves. A woman asked if it was Felipe Molina. One of the officers nodded. The men got in the truck and drove away to Dr. Neria’s. The news of Felipe’s return traveled as quickly as the news of his initial disappearance. Sebastian was on his way to Carlita’s house when he overheard two women talking about it. He then ran to town, hoping to learn all the details.

Sebastian saw the men get out from the Alemán’s truck outside Dr. Neria’s *consultorio*. He was hiding behind the bushes across the street and had a clear view. The two officers were talking to each other but they were serious somehow—not joking around like young policemen usually did. Alemán went inside to get Dr. Neria. The two of them came out together. The officers opened the tailgate and carried the body inside. Alemán lit a cigarette. Sebastian saw the blankets and felt something heavy in his heart, like a knot was tightening inside of him. After all this time and uncertain days, an answer.

The men came out from the coroner after a few minutes. A dog barked across the street where Sebastian was hiding. The man seemed to narrow his eyes, as if he could see Sebastian behind the bushes. There was a faint smile on his face. Then the other man said something and they both got in the truck. Sebastian saw the truck drive away and Alemán's cigarette butt go flying out the window. The door to Dr. Neria's was left open.

Sebastian didn't go in right away. He walked past the door a couple of times, straining his eyes to look inside. He listened for other people's voices, for Dr. Neria's, but the place was silent. There were no signs of anybody. Sebastian stood at the door and pushed it open completely. Nothing. There was a long pathway with many doors and windows. The area was open like a patio. There was no roof and the sun was shining placidly on the cement floor. There were plants in plastic pots like Sebastian's mother had at home. There were a couple of tall gas tanks, hooked up to a leaking water heater in the far corner; a dark brown stain was under it, where the rust and water had gathered. There were trees in the back of the patio and an *enredadera* that climbed the entire wall and kept going, holding on to branches and the trunks of the trees. Sebastian peered through one of the windows and saw a table with a white bundle lying on top. He tried to open the door and it was unlocked. He went in.

The smell was the first thing he noticed. It smelled like the sea does sometimes after a big storm—like death and also like old water and earth. It was humid in the room. It was warm because the sun was shining through the window, casting a long ray of light at the feet of the table. Sebastian approached the body slowly, suddenly realizing that he had never seen a dead person before. He had heard of them, the dead. He had walked on the very spot, corner street, grassy path, where dead people had been found before, but had never seen one. He had seen people get badly hurt before but they always survived. He had seen an old

woman fall down a flight of stairs and lay there, quiet as a mouse. But she got better. Dr. Neria was called and he came and saved her. Later on he saw that woman walking around like nothing had happened.

He put his hand on the blanket. It was moist.

“What are you doing here?” A woman’s voice came from behind him. He thought about running away but he couldn’t—it was hard to move.

“You’re not supposed to be here. I could get in trouble.”

Sebastian looked up and realized it was one of Dr. Neria’s assistants. Her nametag said Claudia. Sebastian had heard that Dr. Neria had hired an assistant from the Capital, perhaps Claudia was the new hire. She certainly looked different than most of Dr. Neria’s assistants; she was younger and pretty and her hair was short.

“I was just looking for Dr. Neria,” Sebastian said.

“He said he’d be back later.”

“Is there a body inside this sheets?”

“Yes, they just dropped it off.”

The young woman walked around the table where the body had been placed and began to unravel the sheets.

“Do you want to see it?”

Before Sebastian could answer she had unfolded the sheets around the feet and Sebastian turned away.

“What? I thought you wanted to see it. That’s why you’re here right? Don’t lie. I used to be curious about stuff like this when I was your age. I wish someone would have shown me things like this when I was young. It’s really interesting.”

Sebastian turned around and was surprised to find her smiling.

“What if Dr. Neria comes back?” he asked.

“We’ll hear him coming a mile down the road. The dogs around here don’t like him and they bark like crazy when he walks down the street. It’s because he smells like medicine. So what do you say? Want to learn a few things?”

“Alright,” Sebastian said.

Claudia started on the legs. She read the tag on his big toe.

“Felipe Molina—Drowned,” she said.

The person who wrote this had been nervous when they wrote the name. Felipe Molina. The ink had run out at the end of the letter “a” in Molina. Then the person had to retrace the letter and now it looked more like an o than an a. Felipe Molino sounded very strange. Sebastian wished he could fix it. “Molina,” he whispered to himself. Holding the tag. “Molina.” Claudia continued uncovering more of the body until only the face was left covered, and of course, the groin.

“Wow, I’ve never actually seen this before. I’ve read about it but I never thought I’d see it in my lifetime—it’s very rare.”

The body was fixed in a position of motion, as if it was falling through a torrent of space, arms and legs slightly bent, fists clenched, mouth opened as if speaking.

Sebastian put his hand on the table. What for Claudia was a medical rarity for Sebastian was stunning. He had prepared himself for putrefaction, he had seen what happens to dead things at sea, the swelling and bulging, the change in colors and textures, the smell—but the body had undergone a different process; it was remarkably preserved.

“Is it a miracle?” Sebastian asked.

He expected to see a dismantled mass of flesh and bones, but there was none of that. It was Felipe. It was his father’s face, his hands as he remembered them, his fingernails and toenails, clean. This was not a body; it was Felipe. He had returned from the sea.

“It’s not a miracle. The body has undergone adipocere formation.”

Sebastian struggled to keep his emotions below the surface. He began to tremble slightly and he felt as if he might faint. Claudia failed to notice and continued her analysis of the body.

“You see here,” Claudia asked without looking at Sebastian, focusing only on the body, “the body didn’t decompose because of the water and the fat in the body. The fat created a cast around the body tissues—that’s why he looks so well preserved. He must have been underwater for a long time.”

“Can you say what happened to him?” Sebastian said.

“We can see everything. Every bruise or scar should still be here.”

The sheet fell off from Felipe’s face and Claudia tried to cover it again but Sebastian didn’t let her; he held the sheet back and was fixed on his father’s features.

His thin mustache and long nose. The eyes that could express that most beautiful and simple feelings. His father’s open mouth and its straight teeth, the hollow beneath his cheekbones and his prominent chin. His Adam’s apple, sharp and prominent in his neck.

What a good father Felipe had been to him, in spite of how lonely he seemed always. Alicia had grown distant over the years, there was no denying that but Felipe had always been there for Sebastian. On one occasion, walking down the street, Felipe bumped into another man, who called him a stupid fisherman. Felipe kept walking past the man and

talked to Sebastian as if the man hadn't said anything. Sebastian never said anything about this to his mother. First there'd be no point in doing so. She usually stared out the window and hardly even answered when spoken to. She had become quiet. Her voice was hardly ever heard in the house. Felipe and her still talked but Sebastian could never hear what they said to each other. It was always whispered. It was always behind closed doors. If his mother's voice was heard in the house it was usually when she got fed up with her own silence. Then she'd scream at Felipe to get out, to find something productive to do, to be a man. That phrase was actually her favorite or at least the one Sebastian heard her say the most. Sebastian always wondered what she meant by that. His father was a man. He got up early in the morning and went to work. He came back later for lunch and then he'd go out again to prepare the boat for the next day. That or he'd go to work at Juancho's house and come home late at night, very tired. He was a man. He brought home money—even if it was only enough to buy beans and rice and old bread. He was a man because men have wives and children and hands that are rough, dry and cracked from working.

The morning Felipe died Sebastian didn't say goodbye to him. He forgot. Both of them went off to their own duties and forgot to say goodbye. It was as simple as that. If Sebastian would have known that the day he went outside, gave a chunk of old bread to the canaries, and went to school, was going to be his father's last day, he would have gone with him, he would have followed him to the depths of the sea. Felipe was just a simple man who urged Sebastian to always look beyond the surface of things.

"There is more to this," he told him once and he was holding in his hand the soft, dead body of one of Alicia's canaries.

“He is no longer caged, you see? And I’m not talking about this cage,” he said while he pointed to the wire cage where two more canaries were happily chirping.

“I’m talking about this cage,” and he touched with the tip of his finger the bulge of the bird’s chest. He massaged the yellow plumage with his finger.

“He is really flying now,” he said to Sebastian. But Sebastian had not understood what his father was trying to tell him. Still he nodded when his father asked him if he understood. Together they buried it near a tree in the backyard.

Now he began to understand what his father had told him. His father had been caged too. These stiff hands that Sebastian could see clenching at the air, were not the hands of his father. Those eyes were not his father’s eyes. Sebastian understood that his father had gone, that he was flying or diving or walking or falling, anything except lying on that table, naked beneath their eyes. He was going to place a hand on the body but Claudia stopped him.

“We can mess with the body—Dr. Neria said not to touch it.”

Sebastian stepped back and smiled at Claudia. At that moment Claudia saw Sebastian and Felipe and started to notice something, a slight resemblance.

“Oh, my God!” she said and covered the body quickly. “You’re related to him. You weren’t supposed to see that!” she screamed.

“It’s ok. I needed to see him,” Sebastian said.

Claudia took one more glance at the body and finally concluded no one should have seen the body, especially anyone who knew Felipe.

In the shock of everything he had forgotten to breathe. Sebastian felt dizzy. Everything around him spun around. He heard the dogs barking in the distance and understood that Dr. Neria was coming back. He took off running.

Sebastian ran down the narrow alleyway between the houses and continued running. He heard Dr. Neria's yelling for him to stop but he kept running.

Whenever Sebastian needed a place to hide he'd go to church. It was quiet and nobody went there unless they really had to. He saw the church as he turned the corner by the plaza. He was out of breath. People stared at him. They probably thought he had stolen something or was running away. Nobody would believe him if he was to say what he just saw, that his father had left this world and shed his body, leaving it in perfect condition, like a shell or an empty room. He wanted to scream at the top of his lungs that his father was a real man and that now he was free to find out what lay at the bottom of the sea or at the top of the highest clouds. Free to satisfy his curiosity about the things that had plagued him throughout his life.

Sebastian ran across the plaza. The door of the church was still open. It glowed in the distance, an orange glow of candlelight. His footsteps echoed against the old walls of the church and doves scattered. His breathing was agitated and his heart was full. As he ran towards the church he could hear the shuffling of the birds' wings, flying, diving, and circling in the clear sky above him.

14. *El acto de morir*

Doctor Neria ordered a truck full of ice to be delivered to his *consultorio*, where Felipe's body still remained. The Captain denied Alicia's claim to the body because he wanted to see it before it was buried and he wanted to talk to Dr. Neria regarding its mysterious transformation. The men from the market delivered the ice already believing that Felipe's body was sacred. As they piled the cases of ice in the room where the body was kept, they sang hymns and worked with a calm usually reserved for old, spiritual rituals, like exorcisms and spiritual cleanses. When they were done, the oldest of them, a man in his late fifties, knelt next to the body, kissed the sheet, and christened himself. The other men were too young and afraid to follow his example. When they came outside and got in their truck, they were convinced that they had shared a religious experience, something they had to tell others. As they drove back to the market, trying to remember every detail, the men were quiet. They enjoyed the story they would share.

"You could smell roses," the old man told to the others.

The Captain was not a devout religious man. He preferred facts to faith. He pursued undeniable truths rather than plausible explanations, which he often called delusions. When news had reached him of Felipe's body's "miraculous" transformation, at first he thought people just hadn't seen what happens to a body at sea. It is amazing and wonderfully scary, the demise which awaits us all, he thought, but not miraculous. Not by any means. In fact, its certainty is the opposite of a miracle; it is God acting according to plan, the wheels of life turning efficiently and without fail. So when Dr. Neria warned him that what he would see

was “out of the ordinary,” the Captain, impatiently urged him to lift the white cloth covering Felipe.

“Spare me the drama, Doctor,” the Captain said.

“Alright,” Dr. Neria said. “Here it is.”

The room quickly filled with a moldy smell, like old cheese.

“And they said he smelled like roses!” said Alemán.

The Captain took a step back in disbelief. The body seemed fresh, protected.

“Son of a bitch,” he said. “How is this possible, Doctor? The man’s been gone for almost three months. It’s hard to believe he would even show up again...he should have been eaten by now. There’s all kinds of animals in the water...”

“It certainly seems like a body should disintegrate at sea—the exposure to the elements alone would be enough to reduce this man to mere bones,” Dr. Neria said, as he uncovered the rest of Felipe’s body. The Captain and Alemán remained distant, their eyes fixed on Felipe’s face and his arms and then his abdomen and his legs and his big feet.

“Tell me,” the Captain said in almost a whisper. “Tell me what this is.”

“It’s a bio-chemical process which takes place post-mortem only in water or highly humid soil. If you pay close attention you can see there is dirt in his fingernails. He was also clutching a fistful of seaweed in each hand when he was taken out of the water. There are no bites or tears on the skin. No signs of predator or scavenger activity. No major trauma to the head. No major organs compromised aside from the lungs during drowning.”

The Captain got closer and inspected the body, looking for anything he might construe as evidence that there was a killer.

“You can even see old scars,” said Dr. Neria.

“I don’t need old scars,” said the Captain. He inspected every inch, getting his face closer to the body and covering his face with his leather gloves. “You still haven’t explained the status of the body.”

Dr. Neria came closer and put a hand the Captain’s shoulder, to get his attention.

“The tide and the current took his body to shallow water. There he tangled in the seaweed. The thick seaweed protected him from animals, and the bay has almost no waves, so there he remained all this time. Once underwater the fatty tissues in his body began to transform into wax. He wasn’t overweight, but he had enough fat in his skin to create a seal between him and the outside world. He could have lasted like that forever, but something happened, somehow he got untangled—”

“The big storm we just had...” Alemán said.

“Exaclty!” said the Captain. “And now everyone thinks he’s a holy man.” The captain touched Felipe’s chest. The body was hardened, like a cast.

“Well, it didn’t help that your men transported it wrapped in a white cloth and that they weren’t told to keep quiet about the details of the body,” said Dr. Neria.

“Are you saying this is my fault?” the Captain said.

“This has been a very uncertain time for all of us. People will come to their own conclusions if the town’s officials won’t produce any,” Dr. Neria said.

“Let me worry about the people,” the Captain said. “You worry about this body. I want to know if it holds any clues.”

“It doesn’t,” Dr. Neria said. “I told you. Everything seems in order. No foul play. No deathly blow. But I can tell you this.”

“What?”

“The fact that he was holding seaweed in both hands, indicates that he was alive when he entered the water. Also, his face, it seems tight, like he’s in pain. It’s probably a reflex caused by the act of drowning. It’s very painful to swallow water into the lungs.”

“So what you’re saying is that he definitely died in the water. We have no idea why or how come. And even though his body is perfectly preserved it still doesn’t provide us with any information whatsoever. Only his spooky appearance and that strange, gesture on his face. Does it look like he’s smiling?” said the Captain.

“I’m positive he is not smiling, Captain,” said Dr. Neria. He began to cover the body. First the legs and then the torso and lastly Felipe’s face.

“The body is bound to decompose. At higher temperatures the wax melts away and the tissues are exposed, which leads to normal decomposition,” Dr. Neria said.

“Contact his wife. Tell her she can have her husband back,” the Captain said.

The body remained in Dr. Neria’s consultorio that evening. At the door of his office, people from the town brought candles, and flowers, and someone brought a photograph of a man and a woman, hoping perhaps that the holy man, in his eternal sleep, would find a way to bless them, would touch their lives in divine and mysterious ways, would come to them in their hour of need.

As Dr. Neria put it, these were uncertain days.

15. Nupcias

Sebastian made a habit of having lunch at Juancho and Lupita's house after work. Working along with Juancho at sea made him understand a lot about how his father spent his days. Sometimes he'd talk to Juancho about Carlita. Ever since their relationship began Sebastian felt more in control of the world, of his life. It was something to behold, it could inspire fear at times, like the sea, but whatever it was that Sebastian was going through made him feel different. One morning, as Juancho and him made their way to the beach, he stopped suddenly and pointed at the sun coming up behind the horizon.

"Will you look at that," Sebastian said.

"What?" said Juancho lifting his eyes from his sandals to the sky.

"Look at all that light."

"You're beginning to sound like your father." Juancho's face remained still. "And I'm not sure if I'm happy or troubled by that."

"What's so wrong about admiring the view? You don't find that beautiful?"

"I see it all the time."

"You see your wife all the time, is she not beautiful?"

"What a thing to say. Of course she is."

"I know she is but do you ever stop and look at her? Tell her even?"

"Of course I do—what do you care about it? You're going to tell me about love? You and your little girlfriend know a thing about love I don't know?" His words were serious but his face seemed amicable and relaxed.

"I love Carlita. I tell her every time I can."

“Of course you do. You’re young. It’s your first love. It’s a thing that makes you crazy—something we all agree you are... like a bull—but don’t compare it to what Lupita and I have. You don’t know that. Your mind is too weak.”

“It’s just that I’ve never felt more alive. Carlita is the love of my life. I will marry her one day. We’ll be one.”

“You’re just like your father...a cloud.”

Indeed there was something happening to Sebastian. He had dreams that he’d forget but whose presence remained with him for the rest of the day. He’d walk looking at the world as if it were playing on a giant screen and sometimes he’d find beauty hiding behind the smallest gesture. Once, a man walking ahead of him on the street picked up a coin he found on the ground. The man held it in his hand for a moment and then got on a bus, giving the driver the coin he had found for his fare. Sebastian liked to think that the man would have died if he hadn’t found that coin. That his life would have been in a prolonged state of suspension if he had not looked down at the ground at that precise moment, just at the right time to catch the glint of the coin that would set him free.

He talked about this man with Juancho when they were fishing and Juancho laughed the way a father does at his own son’s jokes and then said, “It’s like your father is here with me, only a little younger, but just as crazy.” Sebastian loved hearing things like that because he had realized something too, that he wanted to be just like his father. He wanted to leave the kind of impression on people that even after death, people would smile at the sound of his name, and say things like, “what a good soul that man had,” just like Lupita had said countless times before during lunch or dinner or whenever they talked about Felipe.

Carlita was often in his mind and Juancho heard plenty about how much he loved her and how one day they'd be together forever. In the past, Juancho had tried to talk some sense into him by telling him that marriage is a serious commitment, that love is a mystery even to those who experience it, that every man needs a plan, and all of those things that he had heard from his own father, yet Juancho realized that, like Felipe, Sebastian only listened to himself and that in some ways that was more valuable and rare a conviction to have than all the caution and planning that most people rely on. At any rate, their talks out at sea became more and more a heaven for their strange theories and philosophies, although it was never, or hardly ever, called that. For them it was simply "work" and talking about their lives was just something to do while the nets sank to the bottom and snagged whatever they could from the dark silence of the early morning sea. Every time after fishing they'd walk back to Juancho's house where Lupita usually had lunch warm and ready. The table would have plates and roses from Lupita's garden, ice-cold water to drink and sometimes, especially on Mondays, she'd also have fresh fruit from the market—cantaloupe, cactus fruit, guavas and pears.

One time after Sebastian had had his lunch and had stayed for *sobremesa*, table-talk, he went home to take a shower and to help his mother with some errands. Juancho and Lupita waved goodbye from their kitchen table as he walked past their window, smiling and saying, "See you tomorrow, Juancho. Thanks for the meal, Lupita."

"That boy is such a joy," said Lupita.

"You don't know the half of it. When we're out there, on our own, he comes alive. The sea does something to him. I'd be petrified if my father had died in the same water I was

fishing but he doesn't seem unnerved by it. Sometimes we hardly speak of Felipe and then sometimes we actually speak to him, as if he was on the boat with us."

"Poor Sebastian, so young and... life had to throw this at him. It's always the ones that least deserve it that get tragedy."

"Maybe it's the ones that can survive it. Those are the ones that suffer for us all—for all of us fragile people in the world." Juancho took out a cigarette and when he was going to light it, he looked at Lupita's frown and then he said, "I'll smoke this outside."

Now that Sebastian came to lunch more often, Lupita cared more about the condition of the house. She decided that there'd be no more smoking and no more drinking all day; Juancho agreed but reminded her that she too should stop lighting incense and candles that did nothing but make the house smell like a church. So they had compromised to this deal and so far they'd no problems. That afternoon while cleaning the table she realized that she hadn't thought about babies in a long time. She actually couldn't remember the last time she had gone to bed thinking of babies, or rather praying for that miraculous baby that, she'd always believed, would complete her marriage and her life with Juancho. She looked out the window while putting the dishes in the sink and she saw the kids playing outside but there was no longing, there was no pain inside her. Sebastian had come into her life and given her more than she'd ever had. He was a good person. He complimented her flowers. He ate all the food on his plate and sometimes even asked for more. He talked to Juancho with respect and Juancho hardly encountered respect anymore in town—since people didn't know what to make of his role in the death of Felipe. Also he was in love and never afraid to talk about it like older men usually are. There was something so angelic, she was pleased to think, about

him. His mother should be proud of him, of the things he'd done so far and what things lay in the future for such a hardworking man as him.

Juancho came in from smoking and sat down at the table with a tired face and his eyes half closed. "I'm so tired I could sleep right now."

"Well, why don't you? I can work on my garden while you take a nap under the shade. You can bring a book and fall asleep like you do every time you mean to read." Juancho came from behind and held her in his arms. She was changing the water on the roses she kept in the kitchen table and when his arms were around her she felt at home again, like she had been gone and now she'd returned. She took Juancho's hand in hers and led him through the hallway to the bedroom. "I don't really mean that I'm going to sleep," Juancho said. "I just need to lay down for a while."

Lupita put his hand on her face and moved it down to her breasts and then she said, "I didn't bring you here to sleep but I do need you to stay awake for at least a little while longer."

*

Sebastian went home after having lunch at Juancho's house but when he got home his mother had already left. There was a note saying that she had gotten tired of waiting for him so she went ahead and left without him. Sebastian tried to find her but he couldn't and decided to find Carlita instead. He had not told anyone about seeing his father's body and even now, days later, Felipe's strange body wandered around in his mind. So he went to Carlita's house and knocked on the door and Calita's mother, Rosaura, answered the door.

“I’m looking for Carlita. Is she here?”

“Yes, she’s inside Sebastian.” Rosaura had also noticed that Sebastian was a good person, that his interest in Carlita was pure and not just the devilish workings of young lust or anything like that. So he allowed them to see each other, while at the same time knowing that they would not listen to her if she had opposed. It’s better to keep things in the open, she thought, and so Sebastian and Carlita’s romance was something that was always treated as a friendship but always understood as something more.

“It’s my mother’s birthday today, Sebastian,” Rosaura said. “We are going to have a nice dinner tonight.” She led Sebastian to the kitchen where Carlita and her were working on preparing the food and everything else. “We are having some of my mother’s old friends and also some of the women she’s met since she started going out again.” Sebastian walked into the kitchen and saw Carlita stirring something inside a big steaming iron pot. Her hair hung over her face and she was standing on a short wooden stool to be able to see inside the pot.

“Look who came to help us,” Rosaura said and Carlita pulled a long strand of hair away from her face, placed it behind her ear and then turned towards Sebastian with a big smile on her face.

“What are you doing here? I thought you were going with your mother.” Sebastian arranged his shirt and said, “Well, she ended up going alone so I decided to come find you.” They looked deeply into each other’s eyes and Rosaura cleared her throat.

“I figured, Carlita, that since we are almost done here, maybe you and Sebastian can go find some flowers for the table arrangement.” Carlita got off the stool and gave the big wooden spoon to her mother.

“Yes, we can do that, right?” she said looking at Sebastian with pleading eyes.

“Of course we can. Nothing would make me happier than lending a hand in this grand occasion,” said Sebastian looking at Carlita and then at Rosaura.

“Great,” said Rosaura, “just take this basket and fill it with every wild flower you can find. Don’t worry about coming back right away. The party doesn’t start until later.”

Sebastian and Carlita came out of the house holding hands and Sebas held the basket. They walked through the town, the plaza and the church and kept going towards the fields outside the town. All the way they were talking about how much they loved each other and how lucky they were to have found each other so early in life. Also, Sebastian talked about Juancho and Lupita and how well they treated him; that they fed him lunch and asked him about his life and his dreams, that no one had ever done that before—except his father, of course. But that now that he was gone it was nice to find people that cared for him and that he cared about. Carlita listened to him intently and without ever interrupting. They arrived at a long stretch of field, flat yet slightly on an incline. The wind was blowing and it moved the buds of hundreds of tulips in the same direction. They stood there and took in the sight of it all.

“We should live here,” Sebastian said. “We could build a house right in the middle of that field and be happy for the rest of our days.”

“We can have animals. I can see them sleeping over there,” and she pointed with her finger to the western side of the field. “Birds of all colors, in big cages over there,” Sebastian said and he pointed with his finger to the East side of the field. “And then, in the middle, between the pigs and the birds we’d have our house. Pink walls and white roof, and a tulips

all around us,” said Carlita and she began to twirl around, making her dress lift a little to reveal her legs.

“But also,” said Sebastian holding her close to him, “we need a pomegranate tree, right outside the house.”

They smiled at each other and Sebastian kissed her. In that moment, while he was kissing her, he thought about how sure he was that she was the love of his life. He remembered how his parents had once been, before things dried up between them, there was love. He had seen it with his own eyes one time. He woke up one night. It was very late and he heard a sound he had never heard before. He went to his door and then once in the hallway he realized that it was the sound of his father crying. He was about to run towards the sound, to see what was happening, but then he heard her mother’s voice, saying, “We’ll be alright, *cielo*. Right now things are hard but tomorrow we’ll be better.” And Felipe kept crying and crying. Sebastian peeked around the hallway and saw them together at the kitchen table. Felipe was sitting in his chair and Alicia was holding him from behind, cradling his face to her chest like a baby’s. Alicia was running her fingers through his hair and whispering things Sebastian could not hear. Her eyes were full of tears but they never ran down her face. She was being strong. And then, after a moment, when Felipe had regained his voice, he said, “I love you. You and little Sebas are my life.”

That’s how Sebastian felt for Carlita, like she was his life. So after they kissed he bent down and looked through the grass and the tulips and found a thin long twig. He broke it in two and made a crucifix. He joined the two pieces with one of his shoestrings and stuck it in the moist grass. “Let’s do it,” he said. “You love me. I love you. We know where we want to live and how we want our lives to be. So, let’s do it”

“Do what?” Carlita said smiling at him.

“Let’s get married right here and now,” he said. He kneeled in front of her, reached and plucked a tulip next to him and offered it to her while saying, “Carla, *mi amor*, marry me.” Carlita kneeled in front of him and said, “yes, Sebastian, I will marry you, even though we are so young and our lives depend on others.”

“I’m serious, Carla. This is serious.”

He grabbed her hands and placed the tulip in her hand.

“We are out here in front of God and nature, everybody else doesn’t count.”

“It’s just you and me.” She said.

“That’s right. So let’s pledge to each other that we’ll be together forever.”

Something about the word *forever* made Carlita stop and think. Forever means everything and nothing she thought. Forever is like a number that keeps getting higher and higher and never ends—infinity. Forever doesn’t exist because no one has been around forever to know what it is like, to call something or other ‘forever.’ Forever is a dream, she thought, or maybe a nightmare. Looking into Sebastian’s eyes she could see everything except Forever. She could see adventures and misfortunes and happiness but nothing that even resembled Forever. If anything, she saw, and she saw it very clearly just then, that Sebastian’s eyes lacked longevity or eternity. There was something in the way they consumed her that reminded her of dying flames. Nothing, she thought, could last forever, even pain could come to an end, like her parents’ marriage.

“Oh, no!” she said and she jumped up. “We have to pick these flowers. Come on, let’s go,” she said.

“But, Carlita, don’t you want to marry me?”

“Are you crazy?”

“But we’re in love. Now I understand that because my father—”

“This isn’t love. We’re just kids and you leave your father out of it.” Sebastian went to hug her but she pushed him back.

“What are we doing? What am I doing?” she said. She was grabbing fistfuls of tulips and throwing them in the basket.

“Everything is alright. I shouldn’t have done it like that. You’re surprised.”

“You think just because we like each other we have to get married. We’re just kids!”

“My parents were young when they married.”

“I’m sure they planned it that way.”

There was silence after that. Sebastian sat on the grass and would not get up. Carlita said she had to get back to the party and that she had no time for this. “My mother is going to kill me if I don’t bring these flowers back.”

“Just leave me here.” Said Sebastian. “Go ahead and leave. It looks like it might rain.” Just then a few raindrops began to fall and Carlita said,

“Well, stay if you want to. You’re still invited to my grandma’s dinner but don’t show up all wet. Change before you come.”

“Go,” Sebastian said. “you’ll be late.”

Sebastian didn’t go to the party. He didn’t go home either. He got up and walked away from that field of tulips. He got lost in the rain. The rain fell hard, in big drops, and it

felt like it had come out of nowhere. He ran under the darkness of tall trees and then came to a clearing at the top of a hill. The weather got worse. The white flash of lightning filled the clouds above him. Sebastian stood beneath the storm waiting to be struck by lightening, waiting for everything to make sense, for his father's words to come to him, from within, from his memories, but he found that he was alone.

16. *Atzintli*

Dr. Neria sat in front of his typewriter and filled a simple form issued by the State—Felipe's death certificate. On the blank space provided for age, he wrote 39. On the space reserved for cause of death he wrote *drowning*. And on the place reserved to write Felipe's surviving relatives, he wrote: *son, Sebastian Molina* and *wife, Alicia Molina*. He added, *only known survivors*. He gave it to his assistant to send to the office of state records. He figured the form would be filed with the others, forgotten among the thousands of forms collecting dust in the cold basement of the *Ayuntamiento*.

For the rest of the afternoon, he was acutely aware of the presence of Felipe in his *consultorio*. He continued to care for his patients, of which there was suddenly plenty. The incidence of sore throats and mysterious aches increased and, although he first worried about the origins of such an epidemic, he then realized that people simply wanted to see Felipe. They would ask about him and request to know, very humbly and without ever making eye contact, where he kept the holy man. By the end of the day he was tired of his patients' constant questioning. After a while his answer to their query became simply, "The body is safely stored."

He kept the body in ice. He knew how quickly it would fall apart if its temperature were not monitored. Besides, he could not stand the sight of Felipe, not like this. Despite his seemingly peaceful demeanor during his conversation with the Captain, Dr. Neria realized that he was the only person who still thought of Felipe as a man and not the victim of a murder, or a holy man returned from the sea, or an example of a forensic peculiarity. After writing the names of his wife and child on Felipe's death certificate, he saw him, once again

as father and husband. He could still remember Felipe holding his newborn son Sebastian in the moonlight, that distant night in his past, stars shining above everything and Felipe crying a quiet sob, feeling blessed. This was what Felipe had lost at sea, not his life or his possessions, but the people he had loved.

That night Dr. Neria, wearing a thick wool coat, sat by Felipe's body. A candle illuminated the room, its reflection flickering in the teary eyes of Dr. Neria. Outside night had fallen and he was alone and he remembered the night when Sebastian was born. How afraid he had been walking outside into the yard. With each breath Dr. Neria sank deeper and deeper into a tired and troubled sleep, and he dreamed he walked along a lonely shoreline, beneath the light of a dying sun.

The next day Dr. Neria went to visit Alicia in hopes of clarifying the rumors about what had happened to Felipe's body and to figure out the details of his burial. He had seen Alicia once, a few weeks ago, walking to church with Doña Juana. She looked strange. She was different. She walked slowly, almost like an insect, and her body seemed stiff and fragile.

Dr. Neria feared something beyond grief was taking hold of Alicia. After having spent a night sleeping by Felipe's body, he began to wonder if his own sense was escaping him. Still he went to see Alicia, hoping Doña Juana would not be there. He left his *consultorio* early that day and walked the same route he had followed with Felipe, almost fifteen years ago, when Sebastian came to the world. He enjoyed thinking about Felipe and his hurried steps ahead of him.

When Alicia opened the door he was shocked by her paleness and thin figure. Her shoulders ended in sharp points and her hair fell over them without grace, like hair on cadavers. In her sunken eyes there was death—her husband's and her own. She had deep, dark pits for eyes.

“Dr. Neria?” she said. Her voice was low and distant.

“I've come to see you Alicia, if you have time.”

“Please, come in,” she said.

“Thank you,” Dr. Neria said. “Are you alone?”

“Not anymore with you here,” she said.

The house was dark. There were heavy curtains covering every window and dead flowers on every vase: on the dinner table, near the windows, and by the kitchen sink. It was everything that Dr. Neria had feared, and as soon as he sat down with Alicia, he felt tired and drained. It was hard to summon the energy to speak.

“Are your eyes bothering you, Alicia?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“It's really dark in here.”

“I don't want people looking in here. I'm tired of how people look in. Also how they look at me.”

“How do they look at you?” said Dr. Neria.

“Like that,” she said and pointed to his eyes. “Like I'm dead already and it's fine to pass judgment.”

“I apologize if that's what you see in my eyes Alicia. But I'm not judging you. What is there to judge?”

“That I’m still here. That I didn’t die of sadness. People say that when your husband dies—if you really love him—you should die soon after. And I’m still here.”

Her hands came to her face and she covered herself, for a brief moment she almost sobbed but somehow managed to keep it all inside. Her hands were dry and cracked. Her fingernails dirty and dark.

“I’m very happy, in fact grateful, to find you here” he said.

“Why?” she said and fixed her eyes on Dr. Neria’s shoes. It was the same thing she did when Sebastian was born. She shied away from Dr. Neria. She was like a small child.

“You see, I always thought that Felipe Molina was a very fortunate man. Perhaps the most fortunate I had ever known.” Dr. Neria had never spoken like this to a patient. He noticed this slight transgression and shifted in his seat. Alicia’s eyes looked up to meet his.

“What I mean, Alicia, is that he had a life that many times, or at least sometimes, I wanted for myself.”

“You want to be a poor fisherman?” A faint smile crept up around her lips.

“Well, no. But I do desire, sometimes, to have married and to have a son. I know that it’s too late for me. I’ve made my choice in serving this town. And I don’t regret it.”

“I don’t understand why you tell me this,” she said.

“I’m simply trying to tell you that I too feel trapped sometimes. I also feel the townspeople going by my window and looking in.”

He reached across and held her hands, like a priest would do.

“Today I really feel this way and I’m inviting you to come with me, to visit some friends of mine who live far away.”

“Where would we go? She said.

“We’d go to a village, up in the hills.”

He stood and pulled open the curtain. Alicia joined him at the window. Bright light flooded the sad house. Through the glass they could see the town, sprawled flat, and the sea, blue and still. Alicia sighed and rubbed her eyes.

“I’ve never heard of you having any friends,” she said.

Buses came to town only a handful of times in one day. There were two main bus routes: the western/eastern route which carried people through a string of coastal towns, back and forth from the Yucatan Peninsula and as far as Acapulco, and the route that pushed through the dirt roads and twisting paths going inland.

Alicia changed clothes and washed her hair and then Dr. Neria walked her through the streets of her neighborhood, arm in arm, all the way to the bus stop at the plaza. They boarded the small bus bound inland and waited for it to gather passengers. Only a thin Indian and his son boarded the bus, paid their fare with two coins, and sat at the front. They were serious and they acknowledged Dr. Neria and Alicia with a timid glance that quickly turned away.

“They came to see Felipe,” Alicia said.

“What?” whispered Dr. Neria.

“Doña Lucha told me word had spread about Felipe being a blessed man. She said people are coming from faraway places to see his body, to pray for miracles.”

“Pay no attention to that, Alicia. You know the truth.”

After ten minutes or more, the driver started the bus and drove off, the engine grunting already as they started to climb the road that ran through town and headed into the

hills. They were quiet, bouncing every time the driver stepped on the gas. Alicia turned to see as they left the *pueblo*. The dust trail behind the bus lingered, carried slowly by the wind. Dr. Neria smiled. Alicia remained quiet.

Outside the window the landscape slowly changed. Down by the coast the soil was sandy and brown, yet farther inland the soil darkened. Lush vegetation began to creep closer and closer to the road, until there were times Dr. Neria could hear branches touching the bus on each side. The Indian slept leaning against the window and his son remained awake, looking around at the landscape and stealing glances at Alicia.

“The people we’re going to see... Who are they?” asked Alicia.

“When I was younger I did more traveling than I do now, as part of my medical training. I roamed around these parts long before I arrived in town. I got to meet a lot of small villages along the mountains. There are entire communities hidden in these hills.”

“Were you their doctor?”

“I tried my best to do what I could. Without the proper supplies and equipment...At times I could only offer my knowledge but not any practical help. They started calling me *the god of nothing*.”

Dr. Neria searched in his pockets, rummaged through his *botiquín*, looked inside his shirt’s pockets, peered inside his hat, reached in and presented his fist to Alicia, like a magician

“What is it?” Alicia said, looking puzzled.

Dr. Neria opened his empty hand. “Nothing,” he said.

They laughed and the Indian woke up and turned to see them.

“It’s their loss if they couldn’t see what you could offer,” she said.

“No, they were right. At times, men like me are useless.”

Dr. Neria adjusted his hat and looked out the window. The landscape stirred in him strange anxieties. Peering into the tall trees and lands beyond, he could feel the tightening grip of the past, like a snake slithering around his ankles, preparing to strike.

They drove for two hours away from the sea and the sound of the crashing waves. Alicia dozed off, resting her head on Dr. Neria's shoulder. She seemed frail. He hardly felt the weight of her head on him. He noticed her hair smelled like something sweet, some kind of flower or fruit. And her hands were dry and cracked. Too much time spent in the dark. One of her sandals had come off. There were traces of bright color on her toenails and a delicate arch to her foot, good for tall heels, which she probably never wore, perhaps never in her whole life.

Dr. Neria felt the eyes of the young Indian boy and looked up. He was staring, under his eyes a devilish, knowing smile. Dr. Neria looked away and cleared his throat, awaking Alicia.

“We're almost there,” he said. “I figured you'd like to see.”

The bus came to a fork in the road. On the right side the main road continued and on the left a faint path opened into the trees. Dr. Neria asked the driver to stop and he and Alicia stepped off the bus. They stretched and the bus roared and took off. After the dust settled and the grunting of the engine faded away, they were alone. The wind made the trees sing and the birds flew above them in choreographed circles. The sound of the hills seemed a close descendant to the sound of the sea.

“We just follow the road for twenty minutes or so,” Dr. Neria said.

“Does this place have a name?”

“It doesn’t anymore. It lost it.”

“How can a place lose its name?”

“You’ll see.”

They walked together, following the path; the ground around them was patterned by the shadow of the leaves on the trees above them. Every now and then bird songs would break the silent presence of the hills. The sun was alone in the sky. Eventually, after the time Dr. Neria had mentioned, they reached a clearing, and they heard the sounds of people working. The village appeared in front of them and as they made their way to center of it. It was nothing more than a few huts made from mud and branches and leaves. There were women gathered near the fire, scrubbing ears of corn against stone slabs to remove the teeth. People didn’t do this in town anymore. They had machines to do that. As Dr. Neria and Alicia approached the women stopped what they were doing and acknowledged their presence.

“Doctor Neria!” the women yelled.

“Oh, they really like you around here,” Alicia said.

“You see, I do have friends.”

They were quickly surrounded by the women, all of them talking at once, smiling and patting Dr. Neria on the back, offering a taste of the fresh corn still in their hands.

“We’re so happy to see you again, Dr. Neria,” one of them said.

“I’m happy to see all of you too.”

Their eyes turned to Alicia and then to Dr. Neria.

“Is she your wife?” a young girl asked.

“NO. No. She’s a friend of mine.”

The older women gave a stern look at the young girl, reprimanding her for her fresh manners.

“I apologize for the young girl,” one of the elder women said. She wore a long skirt and a white blouse made of cotton, with colorful embroidered flowers. Her gray hair reached her waist and her small size seemed at odds with the strength in her voice. Her face was stern yet soft like river rock and she opened her eyes wide every time she was done speaking.

“As you can see, Dr. Neria, we’re working hard to rebuild. We still have work to do but we’re slowly reclaiming what we left behind years ago,” the old woman said.

The mention of this retreat from years ago triggered a response in everyone. The smiles faded. People’s eyes wandered as if in deep thought.

“Do you mind if I look around? I don’t want to interrupt your hard work, but I’m interested in checking the well,” Dr. Neria said, holding his *botiquín* in front of his chest.

“Go ahead doctor,” the woman said. “Do what you came here to do and we’ll talk after you’re done.”

“Thank you,” he said. With this the women went back to work on the corn and Dr. Neria and Alicia wandered into the trees. They found the well only a few minutes walk away from the village. It was a hole in the ground with a wooden structure, like a triangle, which using pulleys and buckets, served to bring water from the ground.

“What were they talking about back there?” Alicia said.

“I came here when I was younger. This was a well-established community a decade or more ago. They had gardens and they planted corn and traded it with neighboring villages. Some of it even reached the markets of our town.”

Dr. Neria opened his *botiquín* and retrieved some vials and string of rope with marks on it, to measure depth. As he spoke he labeled each one and lowered the vials, tied to the string, into the well.

“I came here originally to look after a elder woman who had gotten sick. I knew she was going to die soon the second I saw her. Her body was in terrible shape. She was malnourished. Dehydrated. And half the time she hallucinated.”

Alicia paid attention to the story but also to what Dr. Neria was doing. She never seemed bored or tired. Dr. Neria thought that the trip was having the right effect on Alicia, and suddenly he feared that perhaps once she found out about the village, her mood would darken again.

“So what happened? Did she die?” she asked.

“Yes. She passed away the next morning after I got here.”

“Was she in a lot of pain?”

“Not really. She slipped into a coma and eventually...”

Alicia looked up at the trees. Dr. Neria thought she would cry but she didn’t.

“Why did you bring me here?” Alicia asked.

Dr. Neria was afraid of this question, partly because he wasn’t completely sure of the answer. He knew that he needed to come back to this village. It didn’t have to be today but it would have to happen. He knew Alicia was in delicate shape, so why bring her on a long, arduous bus ride into the wilderness? He sighed and began to retrieve the strings with the vials from the well.

“They buried her that same day. They were afraid that she might spread her sickness to others. I told them it wasn’t contagious. That her mind had failed her. But back then my opinion wasn’t much.”

“you were the god of nothing?” Alicia asked.

They smiled.

“Later that week this well dried up. Not one drop of water.”

He kept feeding the rope down the well.

“Everyone was worried. They came to me for answers. I told them that it had been a dry season, that perhaps there was water elsewhere, closer to the coast. The men took off, traveled on foot all over the area, digging everywhere in search of water. But after two days they came back with nothing. There was no water. Then the first child got sick. I thought it was dehydration but it turned out to be a strange fever. By the time I had diagnosed the first child, there were others, and then many more.”

They stood under the shade of the trees. Dr. Neria sat on the ground and kept speaking, as if he was relating a story he had never told to anyone. He didn’t face her. He spoke to everything around them, but her.

“I had nothing to offer them. I misdiagnosed the first woman and now the whole town was in danger. A week later half the children in the village were dead. Some of the oldest members of the village were in agonizing pain. In a matter of weeks the village was deserted. People ran toward the hills or down to the coast. I helped bury as many as I could and then I too ran away.”

“How did the village lose its name?” Alicia said. She came closer to Dr. Neria but didn’t touch or hug him. She stood by him.

“It was named *Atzintli*—means water. Until a year ago it had none.”

He pulled on the rope now to retrieve the vials. The vials came up filled with brownish water.

“One day, one of the few remaining elders sent her daughter to check the well and to everyone’s surprise the water had come back. The water returned.”

They walked back to the village and Dr. Neria showed Alicia where they had buried all the children. The humble cemetery was at the edge of the village, farther than the well. A crude wall of stones, tall as a man, separated the dead from the living. There was no need for such measures, Dr. Neria had later told them that the fever spread through mosquitoes, but they didn’t care. They were scared and needed to do this, to cut off any contact with the victims. Alicia looked at the tiny iron crosses on the other side of the fence. She felt something like fear and sadness crawl up her spine and she shivered.

“I’m still not sure why you brought me here,” she said.

“I just wanted you to talk to someone else. I know Doña Juana is your friend but I don’t think her approach to grief will help you. She’s losing her memory, you know. Her mind is old and fragile now. Soon she too will die and I thought you’ll need a new friend. Someone who offers hope instead of perdition.”

“Doña Juana is kind to me, but I guess she makes it hard to think about anything else but death. It’s what she knows best.”

They came back to the village and the old woman from before greeted them and invited them to sit by the fire.

“I understand you’re under a lot of grief,” the woman said to Alicia.

“Her husband passed away,” Dr. Neria said.

Immediately Alicia's eyes watered and she began to cry, quietly, almost shamefully.

"Daughter," said the old woman, "I lost many sons and daughters through the years. It all happened here. Right in this village. Nothing can change what happened here. It's was nobody's fault," she said and turned to Dr. Neria whose eyes trembled with tears. The old woman placed a hand on each of their shoulders and continued talking. Her eyes radiated wisdom, peace, and solace. Her voice firm as the trees which surrounded them.

"The dead are dead and the living are living. We all have to keep the promise we made with Death, but we owe nothing to Life. Life is freedom. Wind in your hair. Water in the sea and in the rivers and under the earth. Birds in the sky, flying high above everything. Life has given us so much, but all we feel is what has been taken. You have to embrace Life. All the answers are here, in each other."

Dr. Neria kept quiet. He found himself listening to the words being spoken by the old woman as if they were meant for him. In truth the days of the fever epidemic had remained with him, had changed him into what the Indians called him all along, a man of nothing, the empty palm in his heart. And even though he thought he had left this event in the past, built his own wall of stones like the one in cemetery, all those feelings were only skin deep, and listening to the old woman brought tears to his eyes, old sobs came to his throat. The old woman held his hand and held Alicia's hand too. Both of them cried like children, and the old woman stared into the fire and continued speaking.

"My people, what was left of us, we found ourselves in distant places, pretending to live our lives with purpose. But we were fooling ourselves. There was a longing in my heart that brought me back, and with me others came too. To our surprise there was water in the well and our hearts were thirsty. So we returned. So will you too. You will go back and

reclaim what's yours. You'll go back and find that which nourishes your body and your soul waiting, just beneath the surface of your everyday life. You'll go back and enjoy what Life has still to give you."

When she was done speaking she looked at them with those wide eyes of her and smiled. Dr. Neria tried to say something but couldn't find the words. Alicia's face gained color and she stared at her own hands.

"The well healthy. I'll run some tests but most likely everything is fine," said Dr. Neria, standing up and pointing to his *botiquín*.

"I'm sure everything will be fine," the old woman said.

"Thanks for everything," said Alicia.

"Have a safe trip home."

They walked back to the road. Dr. Neria felt lighter. Something had been lifted from his heart, a kind of weightlessness pervaded. Alicia was quiet for a long time. She didn't seem angry or sad, but contemplative. They arrived at the fork in the road and waited for the bus to head back to the town.

"It will be here any minute now," Dr. Neria said.

They remained quiet. The sun would be setting in a few hours.

"I'm sorry if this trip wasn't what you expected," he said.

"Ever since Felipe died, nothing has made any sense."

"All I want to do is help you. I remember how I felt when those children were dying all around me. I've carried that feeling with me for a long time. But today I actually felt like I had something to offer. I felt like I had a cure and you know how that made me feel?"

“Like a doctor?” she said.

They could hear the bus approaching through the hills even though they could not see it. Alicia smiled, perhaps looking forward to going home.

Dr. Neria smiled at her. He reached into his pockets, in his shirt pockets, rummaged through the *botiquín* and this time brought out one of the vials of well water. There was nothing unusual about the sample, and standing there on the road with Alicia, holding the vial under the light of the approaching nightfall, Dr. Neria could see that the old woman was right; life is freedom. Wind. Trees. Birds in the sky.

And, of course, water.

“*Atzintli* lives again,” he whispered. “It lives again.”

*

Later that night, Doña Juana went to visit Alicia. She had brought her leather bound journals, and after knocking on Alicia’s door for a few moments, she peered through the windows and was surprised to find the curtains open and only one candle burning under a portrait of Felipe. The door opened and Alicia greeted her.

“I’ve come to have a read. We can’t forget our pains, *mi alma*,” she said.

Alicia took a long look at her. She saw at last the terrible shape the woman was in. The old woman’s face seemed sunk in and broken. She carried her pain in the eyes for all to see, and her trembling hands knew that Death was but eminent and seemed to reach for it with every gesture.

“I don’t think I can read tonight,” Alicia said.

The old woman took a step back.

“Are you tired *mija*? Let me in and I’ll make some tea and tell you a story. You’ll see that before you know it you will—”

“I’m sorry, Doña. I’m not in the mood. I can’t hear any more of your stories.”

“What do you mean, *mija*? You had a tough day? I should have come earlier.” Doña Lucha took a step forward, she was almost through the door but Alicia stopped her.

She held the old woman’s trembling hands in hers.

“I did have a bad day. Every day is bad. But this time I could face it. It didn’t demolish me like always. I saw a light.”

“It’s all a lie, don’t you see *mija*? It’s dark. There is no light!”

“Please leave me be. You have been a good friend to me but I need to be alone tonight.”

Alicia began to close the door.

“Don’t be a fool, *chiquita*,” Doña Juana said as she pushed the door open.

There was silence between them. Dogs barked at the pale moon and the sea whispered in the distance.

Doña Lucha stepped back and the door closed slowly. After a moment, the single light bulb above Alicia’s door came on, illuminating the tearful face of the old woman. She walked home under the cold flicker of stars, crying to herself, praying in whispers, enveloped in the darkness of the streets, which was black as her dress and her veil, and her heart.

17. A la orilla del mar

That night Alicia slept a very profound sleep. She had no dreams, no restlessness. She went to bed, closed her eyes and fell asleep as if she was dead. Upon waking she had the sudden urge to talk to Sebastian. She went to his room but he wasn't there. He was already fishing with Juancho, so wearing a simple dress, and not much else, she crossed the street to visit Lupita.

"I've been meaning to come see you," Lupita said and as she opened the door.

"I need to speak with Sebastian. Does he come here after work?"

Alicia was already walking inside.

"Please make yourself at home," Lupita said.

"I won't stay long."

They had not spoken to each other since Felipe died.

"I know I should have come to see you earlier," Lupita said. "I just didn't know what to say."

"I'm sorry too. I know Juancho and Felipe were like brothers."

"Maybe that makes us sisters?" Lupita said.

Lupita invited Alicia to sit at her table. There was a large pot simmering over the stove and a small pot to make coffee. Lupita poured two cups of coffee and sat across from Alicia at the table.

"How are you feeling?" Lupita said.

"I'm...strange. I feel like I washed up ashore. I'm tired. I'm beat."

“You know, I been meaning to tell you. Juancho and I are so grateful for Sebastian. He has been of great help to Juancho. I look forward everyday to his stories and his handsome face.”

Alicia took the coffee cup in her hands and sipped it.

“If you’re having a hard with him...” Lupita said.

“A hard time? We’re practically strangers.”

Lupita stood up and came closer to Alicia, almost kneeling by her.

“We could take him in for a while,” she finally said. “He enjoys the work and he devours everything I cook.”

Lupita stood and went over to the stove. She uncovered the pot and stirred it with a long wooden spoon.

“This is his favorite *caldo*,” she said.

Alicia stood quickly. Her face tightened and then subdued.

“What time does he come back from work?” she said.

“Alicia, don’t get mad. I’m just trying to help you.”

“You want to take my child away? To lure him with your Indian recipes?”

“What? Absolutely not!”

“You already stole my husband and now you want my son?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about? Steal your husband?”

Alicia grabbed the coffee cup and smashed it on the floor.

“Every night I sat alone in my house while my husband laughed and laughed here, at your table. Every night I was left alone with Sebastian while Felipe helped to build your

house. For years he has always preferred this house to his own! And now you want my child?"

Lupita had stepped back instinctively towards the kitchen. Alicia had never been like this. She had heard Felipe talk about how angry she could get but she didn't really believe it.

"Sebastian is my son!" Alicia said.

"I was trying to help you." Lupita said.

"You tell Sebastian that his mother wants him home the moment he gets back."

They stared at each other.

"He was so alone," said Lupita. "He needed a place to go."

Alicia went back to her house, leaving Lupita standing in her kitchen.

Afternoon came and Sebastian never showed up, so Alicia knocked at Lupita's house again. There was no answer. She went home and waited. She sat on her bed and saw the clouds crawling across the sky. She remembered all the nights of her marriage. In most of them she was alone, and in some of them, the first ones, there was Felipe's gentle face, smiling, laughing, kissing her forehead.

She went inside Sebastian's room. The door was always open but she hardly ever went in there. Now she sat on his bed and looked around at all the random items he had collected over the years. There were seashells by the window and beer bottles filled with sand. There were polished stones and sea glass and rusted fishing hooks. There were rings and earrings and gold chains. An entire shelf filled with strange books that had washed up on the shore. What drove him to create such a strange collection? Was it boredom or lack of attention on her part? She began to think that this was how empty Sebastian's life was, so

empty and desolated that he had to treasure trash and dirty old things that came from the sea. The weight of this conclusion and the knowledge of her own complicity in the suffering of Sebastian, almost crushed her in one moment. She stood in front of all his meaningless prized possessions, his impractical treasures—he was just like his father and perhaps soon he would leave her too.

Among the earrings and rings and assorted jewelry, she was astonished to find a relic of her past. She didn't believe it at first, but there, among the towns' lost and found, she recognized a pendant. She took it in her hand and opened it and saw a photograph of herself, which confirmed that it was her lost pendant; stolen before by a black bird, back when Alicia and Felipe were still in courtship. Here it was in her hand after all those years. She remembered what Felipe had said that day, that family heirlooms have a way of returning to their rightful owners, and he had been right.

Who other than her old son, born in the backyard, miraculously spared by life that night, to return what had always been hers and had lost many years ago? Not the pendant so much, but what it represented, what that old woman in *Atzintli* had called the gifts of Life and what Dr. Neria wanted to give to her: Hope.

18. Los amorosos

After Alicia's visit, Lupita went to the beach to wait for Juancho and Sebastian to come home from fishing. The beach was desolate, aside from a few old drunken men, in whose stare Lupita found heartache and ruin. She stood away from them and fixed her eyes on the horizon. Her skirt played with the wind and her hair lifted from her shoulders.

After a while she saw the boat in the distance, charging towards the coast. The boat came to shore and she waved to Juancho and Sebastian. They smiled like children.

"What brings you here," yelled Juancho. It had been a long time since Lupita had come to the beach.

"I figured we could eat at the market today," she yelled over the crashing of the waves. The boat rolled over the water and the foam of the playful tide. Sebastian jumped out and pulled the boat onto the wet sand. Juancho smiled with something like paternal pride on his face.

"He's getting really good at this, isn't he?" he said.

"It's in his blood."

"That's a fact," Juancho said.

Sebastian concentrated on what he was doing. He acknowledged the complement by smiling and flexing his muscles.

They dropped off their load at the market. It had been a good day for fishing and Juancho's pockets were heavy with coins and bills. Sebastian washed his face and arms at the fishery. Juancho gave him his share of the money and shook his hand.

“Well done, *muchacho*.”

“Thanks,” he said.

“He’s not going with us?” said Lupita.

“You know how it is when one is young. Always chasing after something,” said Juancho smiling broadly.

“Oh, it’s that girl,” Lupita said. “Well, buy her a nice flower or something. Be romantic, *Sebas*. Girls can’t resist a man who knows how to woo a girl.”

Sebastian blushed and gave Lupita a hug.

“I’ll see you later. I’ll come by for dinner.”

With this Sebastian took off, not running but hurrying nonetheless, making his way quickly through the crowd. Lupita and Juancho kept their eyes fixed on him. They saw him buying *claveles* from a flower merchant.

“Good boy,” Juancho said.

“Let go home,” Lupita said. “It might rain this afternoon and I want you home.”

“Is everything alright?” he said.

“Come, walk with me.”

They walked hand in hand through the town. Juancho’s leg had not healed fully, so he leaned on Lupita. At times she turned her face into his chest and tickled him and took in his smell of the sea. His lean-on would become a hug and together they’d slow their pace and enjoy their closeness. It had been a while since they had been together. A few seasons had passed and their bed had remained a space only meant for sleeping. In part because they had tried so long to have children and failed to conceive. They had waited in Dr. Neria’s

consultorio countless times only to hear the same words, over and over: *I'm sorry, but there is no pregnancy. Have you done everything I told you do?*

They had followed Dr. Neria's advice, plus whatever other tricks of the trade, as told by the women in the neighborhood and at the market. They had lit candles for San *Ramón de Nonato*, prayed for a miracle from *San Antonio de Padua*, asked in tears for blessings from la *Virgen de Guadalupe*, and held each other, looking in each other's eyes in the peak of passion, but still they remained alone, just them in their house. Eventually lovemaking was depressing, too attached to those failures, and there the issue had remained. But ever since Sebastian came into their lives, they had begun to remember the joys they held in themselves.

If they didn't believe that they would ever conceive, it began to seem more and more possible that they would start to believe in the magic they once had. The last few months with Sebastian had removed those afternoon silences in which they used to hide from each other, until nightfall. There were times when they had dinner and it didn't seem like every other night. They found in each other something new, or perhaps something that was as old as what they once felt when they first met.

They walked inside their home and Lupita took his hand and kissed it. Juancho smiled and ran his fingers through her hair and felt her smooth face. Lupita remembered the simple things in their lives, memories they shared, like dancing close in the plaza when they were young, late at night, to the music of old, out-of-tune guitars and the solemn voices of tired musicians. She remembered Juancho's face under the dim lights of the plaza, his cocky smile, his voice full of lyrics and jokes; his thin lips tasted of sweet liquor.

"Follow me," he said and guided her to the bedroom.

"Juancho," she said. "It's the middle of the day."

“Remember how I used to wake you before I went to work?”

“Those were the days,” she said. “Eventually all you wanted was breakfast.”

He carried her and placed her on their bed.

“I’m starting to remember something much more delectable,” he said.

Lupita felt his hands around her. His touch was familiar but somehow rolling around in the sheets with Juancho was like getting tossed by the playful waves in the sea. His strong arms lifted her and his lips on her breasts pulled her down. She held his head against her stomach and he kissed it, as if in farewell to what never came, and then Juacho marked her whole body with kisses, biting her skin gently around her ribs, running his fingers along her thighs, plunging his hand between her legs.

Afterwards, Lupita lay awake in Juancho’s arms. When before her thoughts would turn to children—the ones she might give birth to if all their prayers paid off—that afternoon, Lupita felt safe in Juancho’s arms, in each other’s love. There was no longing for more. Lately the voices of children she used to hear in the house had quieted, and with that something else had come, a peaceful serenity. For the first time she was excited to find out, not if Juancho had brought many fish to shore, but rather if she would figure out what fortunes still awaited her, how she would spend living the rest of her new life.

19. La reja de un penar

There are times when it rains and it seems like the whole town will drown. It was just such a morning when Felipe opened his eyes and saw a bird sketched on the ceiling above the bed where he slept. It was sketched with charcoal and only the silhouette of the bird was there. The bird had no eyes or feathers. It was just the outline of it looking seemingly alive every time Felipe blinked. He got up and went outside. The bird lady's cabin was not big but it had a heart, a feeling of home that cabins usually reserve for people who own them. Felipe walked from the bedroom to the kitchen and found a bird perched on the back of chair. It didn't move or seem worried as Sebastian approached it and when he extended his hand for bird to stand on, the tiny bird walked over to his finger and stood there peacefully. Felipe looked at the bird, it had beautiful feathers, mostly brown with accents of bright blue and purple. The bird flew from his hand at the sound of Maria's voice coming from outside—it was as if the bird was responding to her calling. Felipe went too. Maria was outside in the porch, sitting on her rocking chair with birds all around her. Felipe stood under the doorway, looking at her as she looked at the landscape, the mountains, the sea far beyond in the distance. Felipe was naked and felt the cool breeze of early morning embracing him like the flow of a gentle river. It was the kind of morning that could also be an evening—the whole world felt trapped between two moments and it was then, looking at Maria and her birds and the flowers of her garden, that Felipe understood what he had to do. He walked over to her and knelt at her feet. The birds scattered and then slowly returned like a wave in the sea.

“Felipe, are you alright?”

“You were talking to your birds. I heard you.”

“Yes, I do that sometimes when it rains so they don’t get sad.”

“Do they ever say anything back?”

“Not really. It’s not meant to be a conversation.”

“I think the birds are saying that I love you.”

Felipe raised his face from where it was hidden at the skirt of her dress, and she held his face in her hands.

“Do you think the birds might be forgetting something—that you already love someone else?”

Felipe sank his face in her skirt again and said with his voice slightly muffled, “You know I only love you.”

Maria held him and focused her eyes at the tip of a distant mountain, like she’d usually do when a bird is sick and she’s trying to think of a way to cure him.

“Sometimes, life gives us glimpses into other facets of life, Felipe. It shows you what else could have happened, what other things you could have loved. But that’s all it is—a glimpse, *cielo*, into a life you’ll never have because you’re not meant to have it. Only it was so perfect that Life decided to show it to you, so you could see.”

“How can you say it’s not meant to be? You don’t feel it?”

“What I feel is that we were lovers in some past life and now we’ve found each other but in this lifetime we can’t be.”

“I’ve always loved birds—before I even met you I loved them. I never had any but I always regarded them as special. Don’t you think there’s a reason for that? I used to dream of birds flying around my bed, circling my bed, when I was a child. I used to dream—”

“What are you going to do, stop being a fisherman? Stop being a father? Stop being you just to be with me? I can’t do that to you.”

“Admit that you love me, that this is happening to you too.”

Felipe stood up in front of her.

She could see his thin body—legs like sticks, a flat chest with a snub of hair at the center, and his arms, strong from fishing yet slim and gentle like wings. His hair was blowing in the wind and his face was rigid, hard as a stone, waiting for her answer.

“I can’t say it. I can’t—we can’t. You and me...it can’t be done.”

She stood up and walked over to him and he stopped her, putting his big hand between them. Felipe went back inside to get his clothes and as he collected them from her bedroom, he began to feel guilty about what he had said and done. All those years with Alicia, all those moments he had held in his heart like small pebbles, now stained by this betrayal. How could he be a good father or husband or even a fisherman, if in his heart he carried such disgrace? How could he prepare to face his life again?

He came outside and she was still standing where she was before. Felipe was walking down the steps of her porch without saying a word.

“Felipe don’t hate me! I’m just trying to do what’s best for you and also for me. We’re too old to change our lives now. You have a family and I have this cabin and my birds, and I can’t change that.”

Felipe turned around and said, “You’re the one living in a glimpse, a glimpse of a life. Look at you. You’re out here all alone talking to birds but hardly ever dealing with people. Whatever it is that you’re hiding from—this pain maybe?—it came all the way here to find you. You can’t hide anymore. This isn’t a life. This life better end, woman.”

He went around the side of the house and began to open all the cages and all the birds began to fly away. Maria came down running, screaming for Felipe to stop, to be reasonable, but he opened every one and every bird flew away.

“You’re trying to protect them but they’re not happy here. They are prisoners, like you, and I’m setting you free.”

Those were the last words he said to her and he walked away from her cabin forever. She lay on the mud crying for the birds and for Felipe and for her life that seemed to have broken and for her heart that had broken too. She saw him walk away under the rain, his hands moving as if he were speaking to himself, and then when he came to a rise in the land, he turned around to see her.

He stood there and he waved his hand slowly above his head. And she stood up from the mud, patted the skirt of her dress, and waved goodbye too.

20. El extranjero

After making love to Lupita, Juancho woke up in her arms and understood something that Sebastian had mentioned about her girlfriend Carlita: there is nothing like falling asleep in the arms of your beloved. Sure it was teenage melodrama, fueled by the carnal urges of a tender, spirited, infatuation. But Sebastian had meant it and Juancho allowed himself to pretend, for the feeling was quite present, that Lupita and him were but two foolishly, tragically in love teenagers, boyfriend and girlfriend. Without any children they were always aware of how much their relationship had remained the same. It wasn't until Sebastian mentioned how great it was to see them together, that their love inspired him to love Carlita fearlessly, that they started to value the unchanging, the enduring quality of their love for one another. Perhaps they'd never be parents, but with Sebastian around, the option appeared naturally at their door, maybe they'd be guardians, maybe they would anchor themselves in each other's hearts, and hopefully in Sebastian's, and grow old together, knowing that the tragedy of Felipe's death had brought them closer, had come to save them from a long life of disappointment and ruin.

This newfound love helped Juancho when he walked around the streets of the town. After all this time, there were still people who believed he had a hand in Felipe's fate, and he could hear it in their voices when they called his name at the market or at the cantina. On one occasion Juancho was having a drink after work, treating himself to some brandy when Alemán came up to him, stumbling from his own drinking.

"Let's step outside," the giant foreigner said. He placed his gun on the table and sniffed the air like a stray dog.

"I'm fine right here," Juancho said. He'd had nightmares about this man. Alemán would drag him from his hair into a dark room and beat him. The blows would make him bleed and in that painful storm of fists and kicks, he could hear Felipe calling for him, from somewhere beyond the dark.

"I just want to talk," Alemán said.

"If you give me your gun I'll come with you," Juancho said, knowing well that if Alemán wanted to kill him, his two fists would be enough to do the job.

Alemán laughed and handed him the gun.

"We had a rough start," he said. "I can be your friend now."

The two stepped outside and went behind the cantina, by a short wall made of volcanic rock and concrete, which fenced a field of corn that stretched for half a mile. The foreigner climbed over it—as well as he's drunken mind allowed. Juancho followed, gripping the gun tightly in his right hand. After walking for a few minutes, Alemán stopped and turned around.

"Do you know whose field this is?" he said.

"No. Someone with a lot of money."

"I own this land," the foreigner said.

"It's a good piece of territory," Juancho said, unaccustomed to complimenting rich men and their possessions.

"You must be rich," he said.

"I am now. But I wasn't always. My brother and his wife used to work a field like this back home. Plant the seeds. Harvest." He spit and pulled his hat over his eyes. The noonday sun peered from behind the clouds.

“Why did you bring me here? What is it that you want to discuss?” Juancho said. He cocked the gun and rested it by his thigh.

“I was just a young man when I first came here. I won’t tell you from where because it wouldn’t make a difference. But I always wanted to have my own land,” he stretched his arms to point to the expanse of the field.

“I still don’t see how this involves me.”

“Well, back home, my brother’s wife died of some disease. He had me help him get through it—the work and the dead wife.”

Alemán turned away from him.

“The way I saw it his life was over. Crying all night like a child, that’s no way to live. And the land was wasting away. He couldn’t think straight.”

“Are you saying you killed your brother over his land?”

Alemán turned quickly to face him and got close to him. Juancho could smell the liquor in his breath.

“Murder is always committed over something. My brother got sick too and I helped him through it.” A devilish smile came to Alemán’s lips.

“He didn’t get sick. You just killed him!”

“Just like you killed yours, *asesino*,” Alemán said.

The two men faced each other, fixing their eyes on the other.

“After he died, I sold the land and left the country. After sailing for three years and ended up here. When I saw the land I knew I had to stay. I hired some Indians to work it and made my riches. I’m a very happy man.”

“What do you want from me?” Jauncho said, his hand trembling with anger.

“I’ve seen you with the boy. You two are like father and son. Only he already had his own father, huh?”

Juancho put the gun under Alemán’s chin.

“Say one more word, foreigner. I’ll be glad to end your life.”

“The killer emerges,” Alemán said. “I knew you had it in you. The Captain has lost his instinct. Very soon he’ll retire and I’ll take charge. And when I do, I’ll be looking for someone to do the dirty work. Someone I can trust.

“Is that why you brought me here? To make me your partner?”

“You’re just like me. You and me are like brothers, joined by blood but not in the traditional way.”

“I’m an innocent man. I loved *my brother*. We’re nothing alike!”

Juancho dropped the gun at Alemán’s feet. He walked towards the town in a daze of anger and fear. He thought maybe Alemán would shoot him where he stood. But the shot never came. He just heard Alemán say, “Your secret is safe with me! You’ll be hearing from me soon.”

Juancho had but one secret and he would take it to his grave—no gutless foreigner would ever find it, nor Felipe’s family, not even Lupita. Felipe had mentioned, when the two of them were at sea, that he had met another woman. He’d said she was different. He enjoyed listening to her. Juancho asked who she was and he refused to tell. He never described a detail of her. He never mentioned her by name. He hardly spoke of her. Half the time Felipe would speak of her as if she were a memory, distant, an old story he was incapable of telling or knowing completely. And he asked Juancho to keep it to himself and after he died, it was

the last thing Juancho could do for the man he had grown up with, for the twin brother of the soul he had lost to a haunting mystery at sea.

21. *El tiempo significa nada*

After agonizing over it for an entire day, Lupita finally figured out how to get Alicia and Sebastian to talk. Time had passed after Felipe's burial and the two had not spoken to each other, not really. Alicia's claim that they had become strangers to each other was seconded by Sebastian's claim that her mother didn't know how to be a mother. As dire a circumstance as it seemed, Lupita trusted that somewhere in their hearts there still remained, under the heartache and bitterness, a chance that they could rescue their most sacred bond—their inexorable connection as mother and son.

She sent Sebastian to the market with a list full of ingredients for her favorite dishes. Excited and salivating, Sebastian left running towards the market. Later he returned with Juancho, he had seen him coming out of a field behind the cantina. Together they walked back, carrying the food and laughing about dumb jokes they shared between them. All afternoon they spent chopping onions and tomatoes, crushing *chiles* and making tortillas on the *comal*. They made three types of salsas. Cooked a large cut of beef outside in a big pot, under a slow burning fire. They made rice and boiled beans. They grilled fish and octopus. Sebastian made orchata and Jamaica water. They cut limes and oregano. They cut flowers from the garden and Juancho sang love songs.

When they were done they sat at the kitchen and Lupita shared the rest of her plan. She sent Juancho to get Dr. Neria. She sent Sebastian to get Carlita and her mother, and Doña Lucha if she wanted to come. Lupita wore a dress she had not worn in many years and she made Juancho wear a shirt he'd usually wear at church. Nobody asked what she had in mind.

They were so happy helping and working that when she said that they were talking the party to Alicia, Juancho and Sebastian froze.

“My mother doesn’t eat that much,” Sebastian said.

“What do you have in mind, *cielo*?” Juancho said.

“We should have done this a long time ago. We’re having dinner at Alicia and Sebastian’s house, with all her friends. I don’t care what she thinks. She needs to know people care about her. Don’t we all care about her?”

“Of course,” Juancho said.

“She’s my mother,” Sebastian said.

The guests arrived at Juancho and Lupita’s house and were quickly informed that they would be taking a walk to Alicia’s house.

“Everybody grab something. If we all grab at least two things we should be able to carry everything to her house.”

Dr. Neria couldn’t smile more if he tried. Sebastian and Carlita had not seen each other since Sebastian’s hasty marriage proposal. They remained distant and avoided each other. But if they absolutely had to, they managed to have interactions with one another that people could categorize as normal. Doña Juana thanked Lupita for having invited her. Instead of her usual black veil, she wore a white hat.

“It’s supposed to be a party,” she said. “There’s nothing wrong with a bit of color. Life is short, right?”

“I’m very happy you could make it,” Lupita said. “I know you and Alicia became very close friends.”

“She’s lucky to have people like you in her life. Our friendship was not based on the right things. She broke my heart when I thought there was no heart left to break. Ever since I’ve been trying to gather the courage to talk to her again. I’m afraid she might despise me for being such a burden. I know now that I was hurting her and I hope she can forgive me.”

The old woman held Lupita’s hand.

“I’m sure she will.”

Dr. Neria and Juancho saw the lights come on at Alicia’s house. They were outside having a cigar and some Jamaica water.

“I’m sorry I failed you Juancho,” he said.

“How could you possibly fail me, doctor?”

“I let you get beaten that night. I should have been strong.”

“I hardly think about that doctor. I don’t regret anything that has happened here—except for not having my friend with us,” said Juancho.

They shook hands.

“Well,” said Juancho. “Let’s go visit Alicia.”

There was a loud knock at the door and Alicia opened it, peering from behind the door. She was surprised to see all of them standing at her doorstep, holding steaming pots of food, and laughing and calling her name. Lupita came to the front of the group and asked her if she was hungry.

“I guess I could eat something—” she said.

Immediately they all cheered and she opened the door for them and led them to the kitchen.

“I don’t have a lot of cooking things,” she said.

“We have everything, Alicia,” Lupita said.

The two women looked at each other for a moment and then they finally hugged. There were no tears in their eyes, but Alicia felt like she could fall into Lupita’s arms and she would hold her, no matter what.

“I brought you your son,” Lupita said.

They looked around and Sebastian was nowhere.

“He was here! I swear,” Lupita said.

Doña Juana came closer, held Alicia’s hand and led her to the kitchen window. Sebastian was outside in the backyard, standing on the same spot Felipe used to do when looking at his birds in the cage. Alicia held her breath. The image was too familiar.

“I want to thank you Alicia,” she said. “I know I’m a bit crazy. But I really treasure your friendship. I’m ready now to move forward and I’ll be there with you if you need a friend. I even burned all the journals.

“Oh my God,” said Alicia. “They were your life,” she said.

“No. This is my life. You and my family. My memory is leaving all the rest behind.”

The women embraced each other and smiled. The rest of the women came closer to them and place a hand on Alicia’s shoulders and patted her back.

“Go to him now,” Doña Juana said pointing to Sebastian.

“Yes, you wanted to talk to him,” said Lupita. “Here he is.”

“He really needs you, Alicia,” Carlita said.

They all surrounded her by the window, all these friends she didn't know she had, and for the first time she didn't feel alone in her house. For the first time she felt gentle warmth fill her heart. Tears rolled down her face.

She stepped outside and walked over to Sebastian. It was beginning to get dark outside. The pale moon was barely visible. She could hear a bird singing inside the bird and Sebastian's own whistling. It seemed like they were talking to each other in songs only they knew.

"You know you were born here? Out here on this yard?"

He said nothing.

"You're almost standing on the very spot."

Sebastian didn't turn to face her yet but he stopped whistling and put his hands in his pockets.

"You may have taken your first breath in the house, but you came to the world out here."

Sebastian turned around and she saw in his eyes that he didn't hate her. Somehow she knew he didn't hate her, that he was just hurt.

"I was so scared when you were born. I remember I was very sick."

As they stood there again in the backyard, mother and son, after a whole life of being apart, yet living together, it was hard for Alicia to know what to say.

"I remember your eyes, *cielo*. I remember your little hands."

"Where were you?" he asked. This was the question he wanted to know all his life. This was the question that had plagued him even before he could articulate it in his head, even as a small child.

“*Cielo*,” she said. “I was lost inside my anger and my fears and my nightmares. I drove your father away from me and he suffered. I ignored you and you too have been hurt. But your father is dead—” She fell to her knees, crying.

People in the house wanted to intervene but Doña Juana stood by the door and urged them to let this play out. “They have to go through this,” she said. Sebastian went to his mother and stood over her. She reached and touched his ankle. She kept crying until Sebastian had to kneel next to her.

“Your father is dead so I can’t ask him to forgive me, but you’re still here. I can’t live without you, son. Please let me be your mother again. Please let take care of you. Please let me give my life to you.”

Sebastian hugged her and they stayed like that, kneeling in front of one another, for a while, until the moon came out. Inside people waited by the window. Once she saw them embrace Lupita went back to warming all the food. She stirred Sebastian’s favorite *caldo* and placed flowers on the dinner table. Juancho came to her, and holding her in his arms, said that she was the smartest person he knew.

“It’s going to be fine between them,” she said.

“Even after all this time?” said Juancho.

Lupita stirred the beans and lit the candles.

“Time means nothing to them now.”

Outside in the backyard, Felipe’s canary sang and looked on as mother and son came back to each other, as if they had lost their way during a long migration.

22. Humo en las nubes

The bird merchant suffered terrible loneliness after Felipe died. She walked the streets of the town in a whirlwind of memories and birds. Although the pain she felt she had experienced once before, enough time had passed that she'd forgotten it, and the cold hand of sorrow came as a surprise and overwhelmed her. A silence fell upon her, a panic she could not understand but that allowed her, nonetheless, to tend to her birds, to make the trip into town as she did every day, looking up at the sky, her mind clear, empty of anything else but Felipe.

The day Felipe and her parted ways, she waited for the birds to return to her and they did. But they were weary. A week later she had fixed the cages and all the birds were back where they belonged. She expected Felipe to come back. She spent afternoons waiting by the porch, her eyes fixed on the road, waiting to see him climbing the hilly path to her doorstep. But the afternoons would fade into dark nights of eerie silence and more waiting. She'd see the stars above her. The birds would quiet down, merge with the trees until morning, and she'd be alone. Below in the town, the lights flickered and Felipe slept in his tiny house. Could he be thinking of her?

In the mornings she would wake up early and see the fishermen heading into the sea. From where she was it was hard to pick them apart. The boats were but tiny white sticks floating on an endless blue canvas. She'd remembered how Felipe told her that the thin trail of smoke from her chimney on the hill, helped him get through the day, that knowing she was there, warming her feet by the fire, made the distance between them disappear. She

burned more logs than needed and the fire burnt all day. Still, he never came. He never returned.

One morning while she was outside gathering logs for the fire she spotted a bright-feathered canary, perched on a thin branch. The faint touch of white around the belly assured her that it was the same bird Felipe had bought from her when they first met. She fell to her knees and struggled to breathe. To her it was as if Felipe had undone what had occurred between them, the hours together under the rain and thunder of their first passionate embrace. She knew then he was gone forever. Although, she didn't know to what extent Felipe had departed from her. She went into town, trying more than anything to lose herself in the hustle of the markets and the clamor of the plaza. As she approached the town, she saw a crowd gathered outside a humble house. There were men standing by the door, candles and flowers at their feet. And women crying. Children standing by the skirts of their mother, their faces without expression, just a pair of eyes looking at everything without understanding what it all meant. It was Felipe's house but she didn't know it until later. It wasn't until she arrived at the plaza and heard the news from the merchants and the old women by the church. A fisherman had died. Felipe's name was uttered. The church bells rang and flooded the streets, and the bird merchant's heart, with a somber and heartbreaking plea: May he find salvation elsewhere if not in this world.

The bird merchant returned to her cabin and talked to her birds until the sun broke from behind the hills. The light of the new day embarrassed her, it exposed her for who she was, a lonely woman with a broken heart and flawed principles, beliefs that abandoned her, that scattered like doves at the plaza. All her words about death and how eternal everything

was, how the gift of life is the gift of death—words she had heard from her own mother growing up in *Atzintli*—they lost all meaning, failed her. The facts were simple: she loved a man who was not meant for her. She allowed herself to dream a life with him, in her cabin, which became like a whole world for them, away from everything. And now *everything* had come, had come from the sea and the hills, broken through the floorboards of the cabin, swept under the doors and through the windows like the wind, to crush her dreams into pieces, which they were anyway, pieces of a fleeting, timeless, and joyful flight of the heart.

The following weeks were forgettable. Her days blended into each other. They became places rather than hours. A cold bed. The dusty path she followed back and forth into town. The plaza where she wandered like a ghost. The cemetery where Felipe was eventually buried. She didn't attend the burial but she went to the small mass, held during the day, and lingered by the entrance of the church, hoping to see the widow, or as she actually phrased it in her mind, *the other widow*. It was then that she laid eyes on Alicia and Sebastian. Felipe had mentioned Sebastian many times, and Alicia just once—the day he bought the canary. How distant it all seemed now, those innocent days in her life, before it all had turned gray. She thought about saying something to them, even a simple word of condolence, but she froze at the sight of them and said nothing. On the way back to the cabin, she realized that she could not stand seeing them again. She was afraid of what would happen, maybe they would see something in her eyes, or perhaps she would, in a moment of desperation or anger, admit to everything and accidentally tarnish their memory of Felipe. The town felt smaller with each passing day. Everywhere she went she'd worry about seeing Alicia or Sebastian. Eventually she stopped coming to town. She didn't sell any birds. She stayed home.

One day she opened all the cages, just like Felipe had done, and the birds flew away but they returned as they had done before. In their movements, the bird merchant recognized a kind of heaviness which stunned their instincts and held them prisoners, even as the open sky and the rolling hills beckoned, whispering for them to take flight, to follow. She felt this heaviness in her own flesh and bones, and she understood a larger truth: Death could not touch her. She and the birds would remain beyond the natural existence of things. They would inhabit the space between living and dying, isolated from the harshness and beauty of life and separated from the release and comfort of dying. They would live their lives forever perched over an open cage, looking on as the world turned.

The next morning the bird merchant placed Felipe's canary—she had captured and heard it sing since the day of Felipe's death—inside a small wire cage, packed her meager belongings into a sack, and set fire to cabin.

She stood for a while watching it burn. The walls caved in and the roof collapsed slowly into the blaze. A column of dark smoke rose towards the sky. The birds circled above everything. She turned away, without shedding a tear, and began to walk towards the road. She arrived into town and walked past Felipe's house. She kept walking all the way to the plaza. The bus heading toward the hills was empty and the bus driver was still waiting for passengers. Before she could board the bus, she spotted Sebastian walking by across the street. He was carrying two full bags, most likely some meat, some vegetables, and herbs that he'd been sent to buy from the market on an errand. After following the boy with her eyes, the bird merchant went after him, calling him by name.

“Sebastian!” she yelled but he kept walking.

“Sebastian, *hombre!*” she yelled again and this time he turned and met her gaze. He seemed to recognize her and smiled.

“Come over, *pues,*” she said.

Sebastian hesitated for a moment and then crossed the street. In the wind his hair moved just like Felipe’s and his smile could not have come from anyone else.

“Do you need help with something?” Sebastian said. “Do I know you?”

Although she knew he would not remember her, it still hurt her, but she quickly moved beyond it and smiled.

“Your father bought some birds from me once. That’s what I do. I sell birds to people who want a bit of light and music in their lives.” She showed him the small cage with the canary inside. “She bought them for your mother, right?”

Sebastian put down the bag around his ankles and ran his hand through his hair.

“Yes. We had canaries,” he finally said.

“Did your mother enjoy them?”

“My mother didn’t care much for them. They were really my father’s birds.”

The bird merchant smiled. She wanted to touch Sebastian’s face.

“After he died, I let them go. I don’t know exactly why,” he said.

“You can have this one,” she said.

“I don’t have any money and my mother might not appreciate it. She and I...”

“Listen, I was a friend of your father—perhaps not for a long time—but from what I go to know of him, I can say this with certainty. He would want you to have this bird. It’s in perfect health and it can sing the most beautiful songs.”

She handed the cage to him and Sebastian could not help but smile.

“Are you sure,” he said.

“I have many others. Go ahead and take this one. Take care of it for me?”

“You know, my father used to talk to his?” he said.

“Really?”

“He’d spend his afternoons, especially those days before he...He just really liked looking at them.”

The driver of the inland route started the engine of the bus and the bird merchant glanced over to the bus. There were a few passengers now.

“Are you going on a trip?” Sebastian asked her.

“I’m going to visit my mother at the village where I grew up.”

“Where is that?”

“*Atzintli*. It’s not too far from here.”

“Will you be back soon?” he said.

“I might stay a while.”

Sebastian held the bird up close to see the plumage of the canary. He said things to it that the bird merchant could not hear. The driver yelled something. He wanted to know if she was coming or not. She signaled she would.

“Listen to me Sebastian,” she said and held his hand.

“I may not know everything,” she said. “Life is unpredictable. You’re bound to make mistakes and to wish to undo them. And many times you will have the opportunity to make choices and even fix it when you make the wrong decisions.”

Sebastian’s lower lip trembled as if he would cry, so he bit his lower lip.

“Know this Sebastian,” she said. The driver honked the horn and she had to yell at him, asking him to wait one more minute, but the driver yelled back and it appeared like he would take off at any moment. The bird merchant hugged Sebastian, as if he would never see him again, which perhaps was true. She felt his hair against her cheek.

“Sebastian,” she whispered in his ear. “For as long as you live, you will always be surrounded by the songs and flight of beautiful, enchanting birds.”

She pulled back and smiled at his stunned face. Perhaps he could never understand who she was and she would have to live with that. She turned, walked away, and boarded the bus. Sebastian stayed behind, holding the bird and waving goodbye.

As the bus rode through town, she began to say farewell to everything that had come to pass since she first arrived. Before long, the bus was climbing up the hills towards her old village, her mother, and the land she had escaped from when *Atzintli* lost its name and its children to drought. Through the window of the bouncing bus, she could see smoke from her burnt cabin rising from behind the trees, a faint column of darkness, climbing, floating, making its way to the clouds.

23. *San Felipe*

The weeks following Felipe's burial, the Captain was at the peak of his obsession with solving the mysterious case of his death. He'd stay up at night thinking about it. If he was ever alone in his marriage before Felipe died, then he was really alone once the body was put to rest in the town cemetery. He saw the small funeral procession go from the church to the cemetery through the window in the police station. He couldn't help but feel like a larger truth was parading itself around town and he was simply too simpleminded to grasp it. His men had lost faith in him and soon he would too. He was easily an outcast in the town, just like the old drunks at the plaza and the bewildered, old women who sat outside the church steps, scaring away the bad spirits with herbs and incense. He too believed in something that nobody else could see. He too sought to save something from the bowels of hell: the people of his town, the lives they lived, and his own ideas about the man he had become over the years.

When Felipe was finally allowed to rot into the earth, he took with him the Captain's hope to solve the case. Nevertheless, the Captain held a town meeting where he explained what had happened to the body of Felipe. He was concerned at the amount of religious fanatics that kept visiting Felipe's grave, adorning it without consent from his family, with calla lilies—*water lilies*—which came to embody his story. People who heard the story in distant villages and towns, were told that there was once a humble fisherman who drowned and that, after a long absence, he had returned to his people miraculously preserved, to give testament of the benevolence of God. In his hands he clenched flowers, his body was perfumed, and he was covered in the same wax used by the church to make pascha candles—

for Easter. It was the kind of story that could label a town for the rest of its life, thought the Captain. And he was not about to lose his town to a mystery he knew had to do more with man than God.

He had explained to people what had happened to Felipe's body. He showed them photographs of other bodies who shared the same transformation. Dr. Neria, half-heartedly elaborated on the process of adipocere formation to an audience of blank stares and unimpressed disagreement. It seemed that the facts were irrelevant when it came to the people's thirst for meaning and truth.

Even after the town meeting, designed to dispel the story, the Captain knew there was little he could do to make people believe what he had to say. Dr. Neria and the Captain walked together back from the town hall and Dr. Neria, feeling that there would be no easy way of getting rid of the Captain, invited him to his *consultorio* for a drink and a cigar.

"People will believe whatever they want to believe, Captain," said Dr. Neria as he poured the man a glass of brandy. The Captain took a big swig and licked his lips.

"What do you believe Dr. Neria?"

"I don't need to believe on anything, but from the facts it appears like this will never be solved to everyone's satisfaction. But for sure, Felipe is no holy man."

"I'm not arresting as many people now," said the Captain. "It's like they're starting to believe that Felipe Molina was a real saint, that he came to bless us, to save us from our wicked ways. A fisherman!"

The Captain poured more brandy.

"It happened before with a carpenter, remember?" said Dr. Neria.

They looked at each other and then laughed.

“Well,” he said. “Maybe I’ll have to get used to this.” He went over to the window of the *consultorio*. In the streets people walked about, some hurrying, some walking as if they had no place to go.

“You know, people are living very wicked lives in this town.”

“Only in this town?” said Dr. Neria.

“They go to church and then have affairs. They claim to believe something and then do the opposite of what they preach. There’s no justice or morals anymore.”

“You beat Juancho Torres to a pulp and nothing came of that. Talk about a lack of justice in the whole thing.

The Captain drank his brandy.

“What’s really bothering you, Captain? The town is not that much different from when Felipe was alive and he was just another face in the crowd.”

The Captain finished his brandy and kept his eyes fixed on the streets.

“I don’t understand this place anymore,” he said.

Dr. Neria put the bottle of brandy away and gave the Captain a cigar.

“Go to the plaza Captain. Sit on a bench by the Kiosk. Smoke your cigar. Stop thinking so much. Then go home to your wife.”

“It’s just that...I can’t let it go. It’s like I’m standing at the beach, trying to stop the waves from reaching the shore.”

Dr. Neria gave the Captain a box of matches for his cigar.

“That’s all this is, Captain. You tried your best you in this end the situation caould not be resolved. Nobody knows what happened to Felipe. Only Felipe,” he said.

“There’s someone that knows. Somebody out there knows, but they’re too corrupt, too evil to come forward.”

The Captain lit his cigar and shook Dr. Neria’s hand.

“My wish for you Captain is that you stop worrying about this. People have forgotten about it. Alicia—Felipe’s wife—is starting to move on. Juancho hasn’t done anything that a murderer would do like leave town or something. And the town could use a little hope—a fisherman turned saint is not the worst thing that could happen.”

“Maybe we’ll rename the town after him, huh?”

“I can see it clearly,” Dr. Neria said.

He went over to the window and announced:

“Welcome to *San Felipe*.”

The men laughed.

24. Cruz de Olvido

The morning Felipe died the sea was calm and the sun came up like it usually did, bathing the town in glory. Juancho woke up and got dressed in the darkness of his bedroom, while Lupita slept curled up in a ball, like a cat. Juancho kissed her forehead and told her in a whispering voice that he'd return in a few hours. Lupita mumbled something and turned her face towards her pillow and continued to sleep. Juancho ate two apples and got one for Felipe who rarely ate breakfast. He came outside his house and walked to the Felipe's house carrying his fishing gear and a bottle of rum to help him wake up. When he arrived at Felipe's house he found him already outside, waiting for him.

"A miracle," said Juancho, "you're up and ready to go."

"It was bound to happen, wasn't it? One of these days it was bound to happen." They shook hands and Juancho offered Felipe the apple. He took it and had a bite.

"Isn't it amazing?" he said.

"What?"

"The things this world has to offer. An apple. So complicated. Such a mystery in itself until you bite it and it's revealed to you why God made it."

"Here we go again," said Juancho.

"No listen. Everything is here for us we just have to make the right decisions. That's all that it is asked from us. But can we do that?"

Juancho took out the bottle of rum and had a swig. Felipe gave him the apple and said, "Maybe it's time we begin to take the right path, you know." Juancho gave him the bottle in exchange for the apple and smiled.

“You and me? I don’t know. We’re very set in our ways.”

“Well,” said Felipe after talking a good long swig of rum, “maybe change is coming our way—finally.”

They walked past the same houses and the same people, the merchants in the market and the old men standing outside their doors for an early smoke. This town is not so bad after all, Felipe thought. “One can be happy here don’t you think? Maybe if we had a little more money or if we didn’t drink so much.”

“Again, maybe we’re too old for that kind of change, my friend,” Juancho said.

“But look at all this people. They are not miserable, right? Otherwise why stay?”

“Lack of options.”

“If anything, all we have is options. Some are good and some bad”

“But once you take them they become your life.”

“Man, it’s early for this kind of talk,” said Juancho.

“Perhaps it is too late?” said Felipe.

They got to the beach and uncovered the boat. They loaded the gear into it and pushed it into the water. “Ooh, it’s cold today,” Felipe yelled. It appeared to Felipe that there wasn’t anything more ancestral than pushing a boat in the water and taking off into the open sea. How many chapters in history, how many turning points in the world began with a group of men pushing a canoe into water, excited by the adventure to come; freedom playing in the waves like foam. It was at this time that Felipe saw in his mind what the future held for him

and he smiled looking at the water as if into a mirror. The sun was breaking the line of the horizon and the scattered clouds moved slowly above them with their bellies full of sunrise.

“I was thinking of bringing Sebastian to work with us this summer,” Felipe said.

“Are you sure he’s old enough?”

“Of course. He’s strong even though it doesn’t seem like it,” Felipe said and added, “How strong do you really have to be to do this job, *compadre*. You’re not strong.”

“I mean we’ll be able to get up before the sun rises and get in the boat and work and not be sleepy or tired or distracted?”

“I’m all of those things and I’ve been doing it for how many years.”

“Too many,” said Juancho smiling. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt to have a third person here with me. Sometimes your talk bores me,” said Juancho and he reached in the water and splashed Felipe who quickly reached in the water too and splashed him back. They were like children but they would never let the other fishermen see them behave this way. This was only part of being alone at sea, without wives or strangers or hungry mouths to feed.

“Well,” said Juancho, “yes, bring him with us this summer. I think it will be good for him—seeing what his old man does.”

“It’s not like it’s a mystery,” Felipe said, “but I think the sea could help him to mature a little bit. Hard work always brings out the best in people.”

“Is he lagging behind at school or something?”

“Not really, but I think he needs some exposure to new things. You actually. I really want you and him to get to know each other better.”

“Are you joking? I’ve known that kid since he was born.”

“Yes but there is so much more to him than what you’ve seen. He’s smart you know. He’s so aware of the world around him. Sometimes that makes me nervous but for the most part I know he’s going to be alright.”

“Well, I remember when he brought home that lost child from the market.”

“Yeah, I almost forgot that. He found a lost boy in the market and just brought it home to me and Alicia as if he was a lost dog or something. I’ll never forget the look on Alicia’s face.”

Felipe looked at the horizon. The sun was midway through the line of the sea. Juancho killed the engine and the boat slid across the water gently.

“How’s Alicia, anyway? You haven’t mentioned her in a while.”

Juancho kept his eyes in the water and paddled gently trying to not scare the fish.

“Well, she’s Alicia you know. She has her own way of looking at things and I got mine. Especially when it comes to Sebastian. She really wants to make sure he’s a good, reliable man when all I’m worried about is that he’s happy.”

“Well, isn’t that the same?”

“No. I’m hoping that he sees beauty and that he enjoys people and...life, you know, but all she worries about is how he’ll make money and what kind of things he’ll have in life and what things he’ll go without. It isn’t the same thing at all.”

Juancho kept his eyes in the water and every now and then he looked at Felipe whose mood had changed, had soured at the mention of Alicia’s name.

“It’s just because she loves him in a different way *compa*. Or do you think she doesn’t love him?” Juancho said.

“There’s something strange about her way—”

“She is his mother. Don’t you think that maybe she wants him to have those things exactly because once he has them, then he’ll be able to enjoy *la vida*, as you call it, and be a prosperous person, a happy man?”

Felipe was quiet. His hand was drifting in the water and Juancho understood that he was done talking about this.

“Too bad you haven’t had kids, Juancho. You’d be a terrific father. Do you think you will sometime?”

“If God has mercy on me and Lupita then we will but if we don’t then we’ll be happy regardless.”

“Hey, you guys haven’t given up on the idea right?”

“Well, Lupita has hopes but I’m not sure it will happen.”

“But you’re still, you know, going to the well, right?”

“The well? Yes.”

“It’s kind of like fishing, Juancho. Maybe there’s a big catch coming your way but if you don’t set your nets down then you will miss it.”

Juancho smiled. Felipe had a way with words that he enjoyed.

“If you’re not setting your nets, how can you ever expect of catching anything, least of all a son?”

“Or daughter,” said Juancho with his index finger pointing to the sky.

“Or daughter,” said Felipe. “The point is something is bound to come your way, *compa*. You never know what lies beneath,” Felipe said and he reached into the water.

They remained quiet for a while. The wind rocked the boat sometimes and the water got a bit darker as they waded further out in the bay.

“Do you really think I’d be a good father?” asked Juancho while he threw the nets over the side of the boat.

“I think you’d make a great father.”

“I would love my son more than life itself,” Juancho said.

“Or daughter,” Felipe reminded him.

“I would love my daughter or son more than I can imagine. And Lupita! She would go crazy if we had a child. She says she hears them calling her sometimes just before she goes to sleep, or that when she looks at the kids playing in front of our house she hurts because she knows our kid should be out there with the rest of them. And she doesn’t know where our kid got lost—or if we’ll ever get one at all.”

“I’m sure something’s coming for you two. Real soon.”

Felipe and Juancho smiled at each other.

“As Sebastian’s godfather you have a kid in a way. And if something happens to me and Alicia, then I’d expect you to make sure Sebastian is alright, you know?”

“Hey,” Juancho said and looked him in the eye, “don’t worry about it, ok. I love that kid like a son.”

“Good. I’ll say no more.”

They shook hands.

Juancho turned his body to the side where he had thrown the nets. He began to pull them back up. While he was doing this he was thinking of himself as a father. He could see himself kissing Lupita’s belly and looking at her with tears in his eyes. He imagined Lupita tending to her garden with a baby strapped to her shoulders, sleeping comfortable by the warmth of her mother’s body. He saw himself holding the hand of a little boy walking in the

plaza and playing soccer with a red rubber ball. He saw Lupita baking cakes, birthday cakes with candles and the name written with sugar frosting. He saw a kid riding a bright blue bike down the street, riding fast like lightning. He saw his life as if would be completed by the birth of a long awaited son or daughter, the years stretched before him and his imagination, his hope for a child was reborn, although he would never admit that it had ever died.

He saw his dreams and Lupita's dreams come true. And in this moment of complete clarity and wisdom, he failed to see something too. He failed to see Felipe as he slid off the edge of the boat. Not accidentally, but more in the way a snake crawls into tall grass—without making a noise and without being noticed. Felipe put his hands on the edge of the boat, his eyes shining like the water around him, and he looked around one last time before pushing himself beneath the dark surface of the water.

And he sank slowly and he breathed out slowly and slowly he was gone.